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# “Where shall we go?": Race, Displacement, and Preservation at Slabtown and Yorktown Battlefield

Jacob Torkelson

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# “Where shall we go?": Race, Displacement, and Preservation at Slabtown and Yorktown Battlefield

## **Abstract**

Slabtown, a community descended from refugee slaves and freedpersons, existed at Yorktown Battlefield from the 1860s until the 1970s when it was intentionally demolished by the National Park Service. Colonial National Historical Park edited out Slabtown's legacy, wholly disregarding the contributions of African Americans to the heritage of Yorktown Battlefield. Why was this decision made? What happened to Slabtown? And what does this mean for the future of Yorktown Battlefield? This thesis advocates for the preservation of landscape traces in Slabtown, and seeks to prove that the voids and absence of buildings are a powerful preservation and interpretive resource that can augment more traditional methods of historical research and storytelling that are not place-based. Purposeful preservation of the landscape traces gives voice to and empowers an otherwise silenced community. The editing out of Slabtown reveals the problem of traditional National Park Service preservation concepts, tools, and policies; especially as they are applied to cultural landscapes. By establishing Slabtown as a layered site with multiple interwoven narratives, partially present and partially erased, this thesis reveals how other cultural landscapes, when treated as dynamic places with multiple periods of significance, can tell a better and more complete story of a place.

## **Keywords**

cultural landscapes, landscape preservation, NPS, contraband, layered

## **Disciplines**

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“WHERE SHALL WE GO?”:  
RACE, DISPLACEMENT, AND PRESERVATION AT SLABTOWN AND  
YORKTOWN BATTLEFIELD

Jacob W. Torkelson

A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2019

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Advisor  
Randall Mason  
Associate Professor

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Program Chair  
Frank G. Matero  
Professor

*For my grandmother*  
*Betty Mae Schmidt*  
*and our many adventures together*

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Environmentalist (and cultural landscaper?) Aldo Leopold opened his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, with the story of a sawyer felling an ancient oak tree: “our saw was biting its way, stroke by stroke, decade by decade, into the chronology of a lifetime, written in concentric annual rings of good oak.” With each pass of the blade, deeper and deeper into the tree’s rings, Leopold chronicled the layered history of the landscape. Uncovering the history of Slabtown happened in much the same way—and I think Leopold’s “good oak” is a fitting metaphor for how I have come to understand cultural landscapes. I am indebted to numerous individuals that helped me (re)discover the history of Slabtown and I am thankful to my fellow sawyers for the parts they played in revealing the history of this rich cultural landscape.

I never would have stumbled upon the story of Slabtown without having taken my advisor, Randy Mason’s, seminar “Interpretation in the Future Tense.” Presented with the challenge of interpreting sites with multiple untold or undertold histories, Slabtown perfectly fit the bill. Randy’s ardent support over the last two years has made all the difference. He eagerly fostered my passion for cultural landscapes and has changed and challenged the way I see the built and natural worlds. Thank you for freely giving your time and for generously supporting my work in all aspects over the last two years. Your passion is infectious.

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*“Our cabins are threatened to be turned down over our heads if we do not go, and we must be drove about from place to place, and chased as hounds chase rabbits. And we must go; and I ask again, where shall we go, and who shall we trust?”*

—Bayley Wyat, refugee of slavery, 1866

*“In the afternoon, I revisited the park area alone and talked with several owners... none were hostile toward the Park Service and would consider selling, but with reservations. The questions in general appear to be, Where will I go? Where can I live?”*

—Monroe A. Clay, National Park Service Realty Specialist, 1969

## INTRODUCTION

Credited with “winning America’s Independence” as the location of the final battle of the American Revolution, Colonial National Historical Park does not tell the full story of the cultural landscape at Yorktown Battlefield. Slabtown, a community descended from refugee slaves and freedpersons, existed in the park from the 1860s until the 1970s when it was intentionally demolished by the National Park Service. Colonial National Historical Park edited out Slabtown’s legacy, wholly disregarding the contributions of African Americans to the heritage of Yorktown Battlefield.<sup>1</sup> Why was this decision made? What happened to Slabtown? And what does this mean for the future of Yorktown Battlefield?

The story of Slabtown is a story of destruction in the service of preservation. It is a case where one layer of history was chosen as significant at the expense of another. In Slabtown’s case, the Colonial and Revolutionary War struggle for freedom precluded Slabtown’s own story and struggle for black freedom during the Civil War. Contemporary discussions of heritage are much more attuned to issues of race and structural racism. Slabtown’s fate illustrates the challenges faced by the National Park Service in responding to and recognizing multiple stories in the same cultural landscape. Had National Park Service officials of previous generations been able to see Slabtown as a descendant community significant in its own right, it might not have been demolished entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “edited” in the way an editor might clarify the meaning of an argument. In this case, the National Park Service edited the landscape to clarify their intended meaning—exclusively the “colonial” layer. “Winning America’s Independence” is the National Park Service’s motto for Yorktown Battlefield and it appears on all official literature, including their website: <https://www.nps.gov/york/index.htm>.

Slabtown occupied much of what is currently understood as Yorktown Battlefield. But if one didn't know where to look today, they likely wouldn't be able to find the traces of Slabtown. Short of three interpretive waysides, most visitors never realize that Slabtown existed, what Slabtown was, or where it was. The restored 1781 Yorktown Battlefield has few visual intrusions or any sort of development, precisely because of the demolition of Slabtown (Figures 1-2).

Standing at the Yorktown Battlefield visitor center, it is possible to see the wooded area where the traces of Slabtown are found (Figure 3). At Yorktown Battlefield, there are two general siege lines. The first is the British Siege Line that encircles the visitor's center along the York River. This was where General Cornwallis and British Troops were holed up during the 1781 siege. Directly opposite, across a vast green field, are the Allied Siege lines, a series of mown, green grass mounds and trenches. Behind these mounds and trenches is the wooded area where the remains of Slabtown are found. Along Cook Road, to the south of the visitor center, is the National Cemetery where soldiers from the Civil War are buried. The cemetery is enclosed by a brick wall with an iron gate and has a second-empire style caretakers house. It is one of the only buildings left on the battlefield that is outside the "colonial" time period (See Appendix D, Map 2).

To the south, on the outside of the cemetery wall, is Union Road, the former main entrance to Slabtown. Along this abandoned road are numerous graves belonging to former residents of Slabtown. The road itself winds back into the woods and disappears (Figures 4-5). Eventually, Union Road reaches a junction with Marl Pit Road, in the former heart of Slabtown. At times, the road disappears entirely under dirt and other vegetation and debris. But if visitors look closely, they can still see openings and vacant

lots where houses once stood. They can follow the roads, see the tree lines that divided lots, and, in some cases, walk through the gardens of former residents. There are fallen chimneys, brick foundations, piers of a few houses, and numerous objects littering the ground. But the area is rapidly being altered by vegetative overgrowth and is seldom visited by tourists, who have no way of knowing what they are looking at even if they were to visit the remains of Slabtown. Yet traces of Slabtown are there if one looks for them (Figures 6-10).

By advocating for the preservation of landscape traces in Slabtown, I seek to prove that while little remains of the built fabric—as is the case with many sites of minority heritage—the voids and absence of buildings themselves are a powerful preservation and interpretive resource that can augment more traditional methods of historical research and storytelling that are not place-based. Purposeful preservation of the landscape traces would give voice to and empower an otherwise silenced community. Many former residents of Slabtown continue to live nearby, and the destruction of their community is still an open wound. Their story needs to be told more widely, and the landscape traces offer the most powerful means to do so. A handful of clearings where houses once stood, several overgrown hedgerows and trees along lot lines, and a scattering of artifacts are all that mark the physical existence of Slabtown, yet each tells a powerful story of what was there.

In theory, Colonial National Historical Park's enabling legislation requires the preservation of all historical resources within its boundaries. However, in practice, the park has generally adhered itself to the Colonial time period, stating that Jamestown and

Yorktown represent beginning and end of the American Colonial era. Nowhere in the enabling legislation did Congress explicitly identify a period of significance, leaving it instead up to the discretion of the National Park Service. To this end, Congress intended the park's purpose to be intentionally broad:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That upon proclamation of the President, herein provided, sufficient of the areas hereinafter specified for the purposes of this Act shall be established and set apart as the Colonial National Monument for the preservation of the historical structures and remains thereon and for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.<sup>2</sup>

While certainly outside the *colonial* period of significance of *Colonial National Historical Park*, Slabtown falls squarely within the significance of the Civil War, an important layer the history at Yorktown. Slabtown tells a more complete and honest story of the Civil War at Yorktown by highlighting the primary cause of it: slavery and the resulting post-slavery landscape. With the erasure of Slabtown, what little interpretation and preservation of the African American experience is being by the park does not do this narrative justice.<sup>3</sup> Slabtown has been marginalized, but it is an essential part of the layered history of Yorktown and its story should be brought to the fore of any interpretation and preservation efforts.

The editing out of Slabtown reveals the problem of traditional National Park Service preservation concepts, tools, and policies; especially as they are applied to cultural landscapes. The name "Colonial" National Park itself is problematic; it works

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<sup>2</sup> Enabling legislation for Colonial National Historical Park, H.R. 12235 Seventy-First Congress, Session II, Chapter 837, July 3, 1930.

<sup>3</sup> In this thesis I do not hyphenate "African American," taking up the lead of an increasing number of scholars and advocates who agree that hyphenating the term creates "hyphenated Americans," which essentially suggests that those with hyphens in their descriptors are not fully American." For more information, see "The Politics of the Hyphen," *Berkeley Political Review*, November 25, 2013, <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2013/11/25/the-politics-of-the-hyphen/>.

against an understanding of the landscape as a series of layers. In theory, cultural landscape preservation allows for the preservation of multiple layers in a landscape. It also allows for change. But the way it is used in practice by the Park Service—narrowly defined by a period of significance—excludes narratives like Slabtown that “compete” with dominant narratives and it freezes a place in a specific historical moment. The example of Slabtown raises questions about what values have been preserved historically and reflects a contemporary consensus that multiple voices deserve preservation. The goal of this research is asserting that the inclusion of the complete narrative of Slabtown within Yorktown’s interpretive framework is not in conflict with the historical values already being preserved; rather, it adds different values and invites a broader, more inclusive audience through a more honest historical narrative. By establishing Slabtown as a layered site with multiple interwoven narratives, partially present and partially erased, I reveal how other cultural landscapes, when treated as dynamic places with multiple periods of significance, can tell a better and more complete story of a place.

In the following pages, I analyze the effects of decades of National Park Service preservation and site management policies regarding sites with multiple layers. This is followed by a thorough accounting of Slabtown’s history. Throughout, I have tried to do justice to the many stories, lives, and experiences of Slabtown residents during the 114-odd years of Slabtown’s existence. The story begins with Slabtown’s creation during the Civil War, a time of great uncertainty and a battle for freedom. I then analyze the uneasy existence of Slabtown and Colonial National Historical Park starting in 1930, with the park’s creation. This section breaks down the evolution of National Park Service preservation and site management philosophies and concludes with the destruction of

Slabtown from the 1950s-1970s. Section three highlights stories of black and white agency in the face of displacement, in order to nuance and broaden the story of Slabtown. With this section, I intend to tell the story of Slabtown from multiple perspectives by adding the voices of Slabtown residents and other locals to the institutional (NPS) and scholarly discussions. I conclude by offering recommendations to the National Park Service on how best to begin preserving Slabtown and continue telling its story at Yorktown Battlefield.

The significance of Slabtown is multi-generational and enduring. Recognizing and accepting this fact challenges the narrow period of significance that has long guided preservation at Yorktown Battlefield. Visitors can and should be presented with more than one layer of a site's history at a given time. The story of destroying Slabtown is a cautionary tale of a historic site where cultural landscape theory should have been used to preserve the richness of landscape meaning. Those displaced are an essential part of the way the landscape was shaped and changed over time, as significant, one could argue, as the surrender of Cornwallis in 1781—a mere twenty-day blip in the historical record. While Slabtown is certainly not the only instance of intentional landscape editing by the National Park Service or other preservation professionals, it is a particularly clear and poignant example in the middle of one of America's most celebrated places that can be used to highlight the richness of multiple layers of a site's history.

## **Methodology**

I derive my methodology from two disciplines: public history and cultural landscape preservation. First, I begin by (re)telling the story of Slabtown, using the varied methodologies of public historians. I then use the valorization of Slabtown to reinterpret the Yorktown Battlefield using cultural landscape methods. Building on the primary source work already begun by the park, I look more closely at the archival record by examining documents pertaining to resident displacement in the twentieth century. Letters, deeds, market appraisals, and other official Park Service documents help to understand this story more completely. I then triangulate the official record and archival materials by interviewing former NPS officials and former residents. Lastly, using preliminary GIS mapping, I begin to spatialize the understanding of Slabtown's many narratives, as opposed to a more traditional historical or ethnographic approach used in other disciplines. Landscapes—or more specifically, the idea of landscape as a framing device—spatializes the historical record and allows one to begin to hone in on significant landscape traces.

In the case of NPS record keeping, there is little mention of the lives of the Slabtown residents beyond the fact that each owned a property, which the National Park Service wanted to acquire. By interviewing residents, my objective is to retell the story of Slabtown from their perspective. Photographs almost entirely exclude residents from the photographic frame, and correspondence with residents offers little understanding of their daily lives. Interviews with residents, as well as NPS officials, help to complete this story of displacement. My interviews are a particularly small sampling of both Slabtown residents and National Park Service officials. However, there is some conflict among



Slabtown residents about who “owns the story” and many don’t want to talk about what they see as the past. This makes it challenging to find individuals that are willing to share their stories. The demolition of Slabtown is still recent history, and many individuals either declined to be interviewed or did not return my calls likely because the wound of their displacement is still fresh.

I use GIS mapping to create a series of new maps that illustrate the evolution and demise of Slabtown over time. The primary purpose of these maps is to begin to locate Slabtown’s physical fragments and metaphorically reconstruct the town. I use historical plat maps, land acquisition documents, and in some cases, floor plans of individual houses, to piece together the built history of Slabtown. Following traditional methods for Cultural Landscape Inventories (CLI), I begin my recommendations section with an analysis of physical remains through archival research and photo documentation. By using historical photographs, aerial photography, maps, and contemporary images, I develop a spatial understanding of Slabtown’s landscape traces – which should be further investigated by the NPS in a full-scale CLI and CLR (Cultural Landscape Report). In examining these various elements, I lay the foundation and build the rationale for further study of Slabtown. I also establish the relative value of these research and documentary methods and their contributions, resulting in a more holistic, multi-perspective understanding of a place and its significance. In an effort to begin chronicling the site’s history, I have added four Appendices for reference: Appendix A: Figures (referred to in text); Appendix B: Timeline (an abbreviated history of the site); Appendix C: Maps (for a larger landscape context); and Appendix D: Oral History Transcripts (added for future researchers studying Slabtown).

## Literature Review

Every place has more than one story, yet too often our historical sites and national parks only tell the dominant ones. In many ways, this older style of thinking is still widely-practiced as part of the historic preservation canon. However, modern preservation and cultural landscape literatures ask us to think differently and more broadly about our historic sites. Slabtown represents a compelling case where landscape preservation could have been used more fully to preserve and interpret a historical site as multi-layered, yet its story remains largely untold. While Colonial National Historical Park is documented and analyzed in all the typical ways, little has been written about the park's Civil War history and even less has been written about Slabtown. The first academic study of Slabtown was written by Kelley Deetz as an undergraduate honors thesis in 2002.<sup>4</sup> To date, it is the most complete history of Slabtown; however, it also leaves many questions unanswered. In 2016, Laura Russell Purvis wrote an extensive master's thesis on African American Housing in the Hampton Roads region, of which the early structures in Slabtown were a significant chapter.<sup>5</sup> There are also a handful of National Park Service internal research binders and unfinished reports that have not been publicly circulated.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, more research is needed on the topic.

The story of Slabtown fits into three broader categories: National Park Service displacement and park making, cultural landscape theory and practice, and the history of

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<sup>4</sup> Kelley Deetz, "Slabtown: Yorktown's African American Community 1863-1970" (undergraduate honors thesis: University of William and Mary, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Laura Russell Purvis, "Constructing freedom: African American housing in Hampton Roads, Virginia 1830-1910" (master's thesis: University of Virginia, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Diane Depew, "National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Application: Slabtown, Yorktown Battlefield, Colonial National Historical Park," 2016; Clarissa Brown, "Slabtown During Reconstruction," in the binder collection of Colonial National Park's interpretive division.

contraband communities. The intention of this literature review is to place the example of Slabtown into conversation with these “themes,” or kinds of literature, that it enters into. It is not meant to be an exhaustive literature review; there are no doubt sources I neglected and others that I have yet to discover. However, the lessons and recommendations I have gleaned from Slabtown, discussed in later pages, are meant to be broadly applicable to sites with multiple layers and multiple stories. By placing Slabtown within this literature, it is my hope that the conclusions I draw herein can be applied to other sites with similar, untold stories.

### ***Historiography of NPS Encounters with Communities***

Slabtown fits broadly into the larger category of displacement of peoples by the National Park Service and other government agencies for the public good. Most national parks have historically had a narrow period of significance that valued certain layers of history over others. The act of “park making” necessitated the acquisition of private lands for public purposes. Almost every national park has a story of displacement surrounding its creation or expansion. More often than not, the history of the displaced groups or the removed layers are either untold or seen to be outside the parks defined period of significance.

Historically, the National Park Service has viewed the acquisition and restoration of private lands to be compatible with its primary objective of natural and historic resource stewardship. Put differently, the acquisition of private lands is seen to be

necessary for the creation and protection of the resources within national parks.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the use of eminent domain and the acquisition of private lands through real estate campaigns has placed the Park Service in direct opposition to the people that have inhabited the land prior to the creation of the park.

Over the last few decades, historians have revealed the devastating role of the government in the displacement and dispossession of Native Americans in the American West during the creation of our first national parks (e.g. Glacier, Yosemite, and Yellowstone National Parks, among others).<sup>8</sup> In his celebrated work, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks*, author Mark David Spence argues that Yellowstone National Park became the model for future preservation efforts across the country. The removal of Native Americans from Yellowstone and many of the other first national parks, Spence argues, was done as an act of preservation; the “untouched landscape” and monumental views were best preserved without people, especially Native Americans.<sup>9</sup> With the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the federal government began an aggressive campaign of park making that frequently featured the displacement of minority groups. With the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the precedent of displacement set by the federal government continued.

The 1930s brought with it a new period of growth for the National Park System—and a new period of displacement. As a direct result of depression-era programming, the

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<sup>7</sup> See the Organic Act of 1916, 54 USC 100101 et seq.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Stan Stevens, ed., *Indigenous Peoples, National Parks, and Protected Areas* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the Civil Works Administration (CWA) were all created to employ out-of-work men with the creation of national and state parks. The ideas of preserving the “scenic” and the “monumental,” a precedent created by the early western national parks, was now firmly entrenched in Park Service politics.

It was around this same time that Congress authorized the creation of several of the larger eastern “wilderness” parks, including Shenandoah National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway. This resulted in the displacement of hundreds of rural white families, who like their Native American predecessors, were considered to be incompatible with the scenic and wilderness preservation set forth in the creation of the park.<sup>10</sup> Rhetoricians and historians have examined the use of literacy, or lack thereof, as both a tool of individual agency and as a method of suppression and displacement by National Park Service staff during this time. Much of the literature justifying NPS land acquisition places Appalachian families in a negative light and capitalizes on the stereotypes surrounding their communities. Katrina Powell, a professor and rhetorician, reinserts the agency of Appalachian families who were navigating and adapting to their changing way of life in the face of land acquisition. Her books mark a notably different way of seeing those displaced by the National Park Service; they give those displaced a direct voice and agency in narrating their own stories.<sup>11</sup> The displacement of rural whites in Western

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<sup>10</sup> See Sue Eisenfeld, *Shenandoah a Story of Conservation and Betrayal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); Darwin Lambert, *The Undying Past of Shenandoah National Park* (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart, Inc. Publishers, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> See Katrina M. Powell, *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Powell, *The Anguish of Displacement: The Politics of Literacy in the Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007). For an intimate look at the letters written by displaced families, see Katrina M. Powell, *“Answer at Once”: Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park, 1934-1938* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

Virginia for the creation of Eastern “wilderness” parks, like Shenandoah, was contemporaneous with the creation of Colonial National Historical Park and the displacement of black land owners in Eastern Virginia.

The first National “Historical” Parks were created in the 1930s in the Eastern United States. These parks were created in an effort to geographically balance the distribution of parks across the country and to expand the Park Service’s mission and role in preserving and managing historic sites. In 1933, President Roosevelt transferred Civil War Battlefields to the National Park Service, adding stewardship of historic resources to the agency’s duties.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, in 1935, congress passed the Historic Sites Act, launching a nationwide survey in search of historic sites to be included in the National Park regiment. One year later, in 1936, Congress re-designated Colonial National Monument into a National Historical Park. Historian and landscape architect Ethan Carr writes that the creation of National Historical Parks was an important departure from traditional park design. He writes, “The result was an entirely new landscape—a historical park—that combined new landscape design (the parkway) with historic house reconstructions, archeological excavations, and other restorations taking place.”<sup>13</sup> In taking on the custodianship of all historical and archeological sites, the National Park Service not only expanded its mission, but it also doubled the number of sites under its care.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Ethan Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 19-38.

<sup>13</sup> Carr, *Mission 66*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 218-224.

*Mission 66*, an ambitious ten-year capital campaign launched by the National Park Service in 1955, radically altered the appearance of many national parks following a decline in park funding after World War II. This aggressive new program tackled all aspects of the National Park system, but was particularly significant for national historical parks. Out of *Mission 66* came the idea of “historical scene” restoration, or freezing a landscape in time according to a designated time period.<sup>15</sup> On an urban scale, many national parks, including Independence National Historical Park, selectively demolished entire blocks of buildings to create a false sense of history and place, displacing hundreds of people.<sup>16</sup> The resulting park landscapes were in and of themselves entirely new creations.

Recent literature has called attention to the inherent conflict between continual private use in working landscape and the suspension of such activities in restored landscapes. The creation and management of national parks continue to result in direct conflict between continued compatible use policies and landscape restoration. This is the case at Point Reyes National Seashore, where, environmental historian Laura Alice Watt points out, NPS officials still adhere to “traditional wilderness-based” ideas of preservation. Watt advocates for the continued role of working landscapes, like oyster farms and cattle ranching, in the management of our national parks.<sup>17</sup> Geographers Katie Alego and Collins Eke, when writing about Mammoth Cave National Monument,

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See Roger C. *Upon the Ruins of Liberty: Slavery, the President’s House at Independence National Historical Park, and Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); Kathleen Kurtz Cook, “The Creation of Independence National Historical Park and Independence Mall,” master’s thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Laura Alice Watt, *The Paradox of Preservation: Wilderness and Working Landscapes at Point Reyes National Seashore* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

encouraged NPS officials to not only examine the significance of continual use as a form of heritage, but also to use a social justice approach when looking at displacement historically. What are the effects of displacement on different races and how is that made manifest in the landscape?<sup>18</sup> In any case, recent scholarship regarding national parks has shifted to telling multiple stories, especially the “dark histories” of NPS sponsored displacement and dispossession. After all, the “scenic” landscapes tourists see today when visiting national parks are the direct result of decades of human interactions with the environment.

### ***Contraband Communities***

There is a rich literature on contraband communities and African American displacement during the Civil War, of which Slabtown is a significant part. One of the most substantial books on the subject, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War*, by Chandra Manning, re-examines the role of black agency during the Civil War. Manning argues that refugees of slavery actively shaped emancipation and ideas of citizenship in the United States. “Voting with their feet,” refugees built alliances and actively sought out Union lines in hopes of a better life.

Manning also maintains the importance of terminology when referring to refugees of slavery. The dehumanizing element of calling people “contraband” removes agency from those escaping slavery and tells a different story with African Americans as a secondary focus. In the following pages, I take up Manning’s lead and refer to

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<sup>18</sup> Katie Algeo and Collins Eke, “Migration and Social Justice in Wilderness Creation,” in *The American Environment Revisited: Environmental Historical Geographies of the United States*, eds. Geoffrey L. Buckley and Yolonda Youngs (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2018).



contrabands as refugees of slavery. As Manning and others illustrate, the term contraband was only applied during a narrow period of time, was only applied to a limited number of individuals, and does not encompass all free African Americans. The use of the word “contraband” not only equates people with property, but “in doing so insidiously justifies slavery.”<sup>19</sup> Manning also points out that it is confusing to modern readers. In the following pages I strive to use the terms “freedpeople,” “freedpersons,” or “refuges of slavery,” except when explicitly quoting or referring specifically to contraband camps.<sup>20</sup>

Many contrabands camps were only temporary in nature, and if it were not for written accounts like those of the Chase sisters, schoolteachers who traveled the tidewater region educating refugees, there would be no records of the most contraband camps.<sup>21</sup> Multiple mapping projects in recent years have attempted to find and identify contraband, maroon, and free colonies throughout the country.<sup>22</sup> These projects synthesize the myriad and disparate primary sources in an effort to establish a larger national landscape of contraband communities. Each camp was administered cooperatively by the Union Army, American Missionary Association, and the Freedman’s Bureau. Records from institutions like these and from individuals like the Chase Sisters these groups are the primary reason we have any record of these often-temporary camps.<sup>23</sup> Of particular relevance to

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 24.

<sup>20</sup> Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge*.

<sup>21</sup> Henry L. Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> See Andrea Robert, “The Texas Freedom Colonies Project Atlas and Study: Mapping the Unmapped Black Settlements of Texas,” 2018 <http://www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/>; Abigail Cooper, “FMP CCamps 08.18.2014,” <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1awfJs1EtU6amxUdPPCFZdH7b8dk&ll=34.459843087674344%2C-87.36201965574958&z=5>.

<sup>23</sup> Laura Russell Purvis, “Constructing Freedom: African American Housing in Hampton Roads, Virginia 1830-1910” (master’s thesis, University of Virginia, 2009), 48-50.

Slabtown is Abigail Cooper's dissertation on contraband camps, in which she describes in great detail what life was like in contraband camps during the Civil War. Cooper describes contraband camps as cultural crossroads and as one of the first instances of black cross-cultural exchange.<sup>24</sup>

Slabtown was one of several contraband communities sharing the peninsula. One particular descendant contraband community just three miles from Slabtown, called "the reservation" by its residents and Acretown by the government, shares a similar story to Slabtown. In many ways it was a precedent for the displacement of the Slabtown community by the National Park Service. In 1918, the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station (or the Navy Mine Depot as it was called then) was established by an act of Congress. It authorized the acquisition of 11,433 acres of land, gave residents 30 days to vacate, and resulted in the displacement of over 600 African American families. After the creation of the Weapons Station, most residents dispersed to other areas of the peninsula, but a few descendants remained in the areas of Lackey, Grove, and Lee Hall.<sup>25</sup> As of 2016, approximately forty percent of land in York County was owned by the federal government (See Appendix D, Map 1). This is a staggering number if you consider the number of communities that were displaced for the creation of national parks, military bases, and other government operations.

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<sup>24</sup> Abigail Cooper, "'Lord, until I reach my home': Inside the refugee camps of the American Civil War" (dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Kelley Deetz, "Slabtown: Yorktown's African American Community 1863-1970s" (undergraduate honors thesis, College of William and Mary, 2002), 23.

## *Cultural Landscape Theory and Practice*

There is an inherent conflict between modern cultural landscape theory and the National Park Service's practice of cultural landscape management. This conflict between practice and theory has been around since cultural landscapes were first codified into NPS management policy in 1988. Most scholars and advocates for cultural landscape preservation recognize landscapes as both a *process* and a *product*.<sup>26</sup> Landscapes change over time and do not fit neatly into defined time periods. Traditional ideas of integrity and significance do not lend themselves well to landscape preservation as a process.

The tendency to adhere to traditional values of preservation and restoration in relation to landscapes is not a new phenomenon. Parks like Colonial and Gettysburg were all subject to early NPS landscape restorations, tightly defined to a period of significance, well before cultural landscapes were codified into practice. The ideas of managing historic sites as a collection of elements within a holistic restored landscape are embedded in the first National Historical parks in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> However, ideas of cultural landscape management have changed drastically during this time and generally no longer advocate for a static, frozen in time restoration. Nonetheless, scholars helping to define the National Park Service's cultural landscape program in the 1980s and 1990s refused to let go of these traditional architectural ideas, advocating for a defined period of interpretation in accordance with National Register Criteria.<sup>28</sup> Later NPS documents,

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<sup>26</sup> See Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Z. Melnick, eds., *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Robert Page et al., *A Guide to Cultural Landscape Reports: Contents, Process, and Techniques*

<sup>28</sup> Catherine Howett, "Integrity as a Value in Cultural Landscape Preservation," 191 in ed. Arnold Alanen and Robert Melnick, *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2000).

including *National Register Bulletin 30*, for rural landscapes, attempted to nuance ideas of integrity and significance by changing the definition to include change over time and allowing for larger, more inclusive periods of significance.<sup>29</sup>

Ideas of significance and integrity have never meshed well with cultural landscapes. As landscape historian Catherine Howett points out in her essay on cultural landscape integrity, National Register criteria as applied to cultural landscapes would in effect freeze a landscape in time, fifty years prior to its date of nomination. In essence, the mere act of designating a cultural landscape using traditional national register criteria attempts to arrest change in a place that refuses to do so. The act of nominating a property also places restrictions on its continual use, in many cases, the same use for which it was nominated. Howett also suggests that the field be renamed from cultural landscape preservation to *cultural landscape interpretation*. Historic research and design intervention must go hand in hand in order to make sites meaningful to the public through interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

In NPS practice, cultural landscape significance is constructed through two documents: the Cultural Landscapes Inventory (CLI) and the Cultural Landscape Report (CLR). The first, the CLI, is essentially Part 1 of the long form CLR. In both cases, the National Park Service breaks down “places within U.S. national parks that have significance in American history and authenticity to a historic time period,” into

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<sup>29</sup> Linda Flint McClelland, J. Timothy Keller, and Robert Melnick, “Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes,” *National Register Bulletin 30*, 1989 (revised 1999); see also, The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, Cultural Landscape Guidance Documents, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Howett, “Integrity as a Value,” 191.

components. These components, or landscape characteristics, are the contributing factors to a landscape's integrity and are evidence of a landscape's significance. These categories are: spatial organization, land use, circulation, cultural traditions, topography, vegetation, cluster arrangement, buildings and structures, views and vistas, constructed water features, archeological sites, and small-scale features.<sup>31</sup> Identification and documentation of these features is a large part of the Cultural Landscapes Inventory process. These documents require evaluation as contributing or non-contributing elements within the landscape's period of significance. CLRs take CLIs one step further by including treatment and management recommendations. These recommendations range widely from small-scale vegetation management to wide-ranging restoration of landscape features to a defined period of interpretation. The frameworks for these documents allow for multiple periods of significance and many park cultural landscapes have taken advantage of this feature, but this interpretation of the frameworks is not widely used. Nonetheless, there are now many examples of national park sites trying to apply cultural landscape theory to render sites with more complex layers. In more recent decades, sites of military history have become the leaders of interpreting multiple landscape layers using the idea of battlefields as cultural landscapes.<sup>32</sup> Moving beyond the standard model of a national park, National Heritage Areas and "partnership parks," by design offer a complexity of values and layers through partnership arrangements and cooperative

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<sup>31</sup> "Landscape Characteristics," *Landscape Lines* 3, National Park Service Cultural Landscapes Program, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington D.C.; For a helpful and easy guide to landscape characteristics, see "Cultural Landscapes 101," <https://www.nps.gov/articles/cultural-landscapes-101.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> For successful examples of multi-layered military sites, see Fort Monroe; Roanoke Island; Corinth Contraband camp at Shiloh National Military Park; Freedom Park in Helena, Arkansas; and Fort Ward in Alexandria, Virginia. See also Patrick W. Andrus, *National Register Bulletin Guidelines for Identifying, Evaluating, and Registering America's Historic Battlefields*, 1999.

agreements, as opposed to single ownership.<sup>33</sup> However, a more encompassing policy must be adopted to preserve and interpret landscape editing at traditional national parks as a layer significant in its own right.

### *Advances in Applying Cultural Landscape Theory*

In his essay “Are We There Yet?”, landscape architect Robert Melnick points out that neither the National Park Service nor academics have found an all-encompassing solution when it comes to cultural landscapes. His questions frame the state of the field today: How can we learn about multiple histories in the same landscape? How did any specific landscape evolve? Do we engage, indulge, or deny revisionist history? These questions remain unanswered, yet scholars continue to grapple with them. Melnick suggests that cultural landscape as “an idea” could be a unifying concept, and that there are multiple ways to understand a place and no single version is correct.<sup>34</sup> Reflecting on the state of landscape preservation, Melnick writes, “Are we there yet? No, we are not, but I am encouraged that we are well on our way.”<sup>35</sup>

Stopping short of recognizing the simultaneous validity of multiple layers, the National Park Service continue to adhere to traditional definitions of integrity and significance that are often in conflict with a complete, contextualized understanding of historical landscapes.<sup>36</sup> This is not because National Park Service employees are unaware

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<sup>33</sup> For more on partnership parks, see: Elisabeth M. Hamin, “The US National Park Service’s partnership parks: collaborative responses to middle landscapes,” *Land Use Policy* 18, no. 2 (April, 2001): 123-125, accessed April 25, 2019, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0264-8377\(01\)00006-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0264-8377(01)00006-0).

<sup>34</sup> Melnick, “Are We There Yet?” in ed. Richard Longstreth, *Cultural Landscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 206.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> See NPS Preservation Brief 36, “Protecting Cultural Landscapes: Planning, Treatment and Management of Historic Landscapes,” <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/preservedocs/preservation->

of the problems their organization faces or because they are unenlightened. Rather, the problem between cultural landscape theory and National Park Service practice lies in the conflict between the epistemologies of property regulation and the cultural landscape thinking. Property regulation and ownership tends to be transparent and objective and generally results in either- or decisions. Cultural landscape thinking is a more fluid and interpretive way of thinking that provides for a greater variety of nuanced decisions.

Many of the most progressive organizations—ones that recognize multiple layers, meanings, significances, and truths—lie outside the government. Groups engaged in public history, art, and advocacy are increasingly the models to which a new generation of landscape preservationists are looking. Groups like the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Power of Place project recognize the need for multiple truths and significances; they assert the need to see sites more broadly, not as individual layers, but as a collection of human stories that frequently intersect.<sup>37</sup>

The Power of Place and The International Coalition of Sites of Consciences offer good models for more nuanced and multi-layered understandings of place. Dolores Hayden's Power of Place advocated for a ground-up understanding of urban place-based history through the lives of the people inhabiting the places her group studied. Hayden's group The Power of Place, based in Los Angeles, advocated for overlooked, vernacular, and diverse heritages. Through public art, walking tours, public history, and preservation,

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briefs/36Preserve-Brief-Landscapes.pdf; Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Z. Melnick, eds., *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Richard Longstreth, ed., *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience focuses on the idea of four truths: forensic, personal, social, and reconciliatory. See also: Freedman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007). See Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998).

Hayden's team promoted a new intersectional and diverse understanding of urban landscape layers. More recently, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience has taken a similar approach and expanded it to focus on sites of "dark heritage." ICSC advocates for reconciliation through public history, preservation, advocacy, and art. The group tackles challenging topics including genocide, immigration, incarceration, war, and discrimination. Their approach is centered on an idea they call "the four truths": forensic, social, personal, and reconciliatory. Forensic truth is what factually happened. Social truths are those that society has perpetuated, but that may not always factually accurate. Personal truths are those that individuals hold to be true or that they have experienced. Reconciliatory truth is the ultimate goal of ICSC, the idea being that once we recognize multiple truths and can reach a collective truth through reconciliation, only then can we begin to heal. In the case of the four truths, each is equally valid in theory, yet reconciliatory truth is the most important in practice. It is the ultimate goal, one might even say the interpretive goal.

Approaches like those advocated for by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Power of Place, as applied to cultural landscapes, change how significance and preservation are understood. Rather than freezing a site in time or only telling a single narrative, both of these approaches offer progressive solutions. The increasingly complex and layered approach provides a richer interpretation of historic sites without entirely abandoning traditional methods of landscape preservation.



# 1. THE CIVIL WAR, REFUGEES, AND THE CREATION OF SLABTOWN

In a fascinating twist of fate, almost two and half centuries after the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia, three black men sought refuge from slavery on the exact spot where the institution began. In 1861, Frank Baker, Shepard Mallory, and James Townsend fled their Confederate captors under the cover of darkness. They rowed across Hampton Roads to Fort Monroe in a stolen rowboat. Arriving at Old Point Comfort—the same stretch of beach where, in 1619, the first enslaved Africans were forced ashore—the three men sought refuge with Union forces within Fort Monroe.<sup>38</sup> Having heard that their captor Confederate Colonel Charles Mallory planned to move them deeper into Confederate territory, the trio had decided to flee to Union lines in the hope of a better future. Their decision was unprecedented; the results uncertain. The Emancipation Proclamation would not be penned for another two years, and the Fugitive Slave Law was in full effect.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Conversely, the first legally sanctioned free black community in North America was established in 1738 in the Spanish city of St. Augustine, Florida. See Kathleen Deagan and Darcie A. MacMahon, *Fort Mose: Colonial America's Black Fortress of Freedom* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that the emancipation proclamation was not issued until January 1, 1863. The first form of emancipation was military emancipation, through General Butler's "contraband decision." Also, of note: the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves in Confederate-held territories, except in "the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth, and which excepted parts are, for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued." This excluded York County, yet refugees continued to pour into Union held territories within these counties. Abraham Lincoln, January 1, 1863, The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress; Manning, *Troubled Refuge*, 32-52; see also Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), Chapter "Freedom's fortress : Hampton Roads, Virginia, May 1861."

Upon arriving, Baker, Mallory, and Townsend were whisked away and held within the walls of Fort Monroe. Having heard the news of their escape, Colonel Charles Mallory wrote Benjamin Butler, the commanding officer of Fort Monroe, demanding Butler return the three men under the Fugitive Slave Law, as they were his rightful “property.” However, when meeting with the three men, General Butler learned that they were intended to be used to build Confederate defense in North Carolina (Virginia had succeeded from the Union only one month prior). Butler reasoned that if he returned the men to Colonel Mallory, they would be used against Union Forces in the construction of earthworks. It would, therefore, be in the Union Army’s best interest to keep them and to put them to work aiding the war effort. Using the Confederate definition of slaves as “property,” Butler stated that the men were “contraband of war” (Figure 11).<sup>40</sup>

The “contraband decision,” as it became known, set off a flood of refugees seeking asylum behind Union lines. The first contraband camps appeared outside Union-held forts like Fort Monroe and Fort Yorktown, which were essentially islands within Confederate-held territory. “Freedom’s Fortress,” as Fort Monroe was soon called, was the first of such refugee camps. After the Confederate Retreat burned much of the surrounding city of Hampton, refugees took up residence in the burned shells of Hampton houses. Using government lumber and other found materials, the newly freedpersons built amongst the charred remains of Hampton, often using existing chimneys as hearths. Hampton, the first contraband camp at Fort Monroe, quickly became known as the Grand

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler During the Civil War* (Norwood, Massachusetts: The Plimpton Press, 1917), 116-117; Fort Monroe Foundation Document, 9. Diane Depew, NTF Application, 7.

Contraband Camp: the largest of its kind in the region (Figure 12).<sup>41</sup> Conditions in and around Fort Monroe were terrible. Many refugees lacked basic clothing, food, and water. Yet, freedom was still worth the hardship (Figure 13-14).<sup>42</sup>

The “contraband decision” brought about both a humanitarian crisis and a new opportunity for Union forces. But military emancipation left the identity of these former slaves uncertain. They were no longer slaves, but the question of what they were and whose they were remained.<sup>43</sup> Contrabands camps were among the first places where large numbers of slaves could interact with one another freely. While the conditions may not have been ideal, the camps were often the first place where refugees were able to regroup with lost family members and live together. Historian Chandra Manning writes, “Slaves who showed up at Fort Monroe, and anywhere else they could find the Union army announced their rejection of the status quo with their feet.”<sup>44</sup>

### **The “Contraband Decision” and the Creation of Slabtown**

Only twenty miles north of “Freedom’s Fortress,” Fort Yorktown was rapidly flooded with refugees after it was brought into Union hands in 1862. In preparation for the famous Peninsula Campaign, a large-scale Union battle plan to take the Confederate capital of Richmond, Confederate General Magruder fortified the Revolutionary War defenses of Yorktown, building on the revolutionary earthworks and altering the

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<sup>41</sup> Manning, *Troubled Refuge*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Isaac Jones Wistar, *Autobiography of Isaac Jones Wistar, 1827-1905: Half a Century of War and Peace* (Philadelphia: The Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, 1937), 417-418

<sup>43</sup> Manning 35; 166-167

<sup>44</sup> Manning, 171.

landscape.<sup>45</sup> Despite the Confederate forces' nearly year-long preparations, Union forces eventually captured Yorktown.<sup>46</sup> Shortly after, refugees of slavery from across Virginia flocked to the area outside Fort Yorktown. Lieutenant Eugene Nash of the 44<sup>th</sup> New York described the scene:

Colored people for miles around flocked to Yorktown as soon as occupied by our troops. They had bidden a final farewell to slavery. ... Their joy was unbounded. They strove in many ways to show their satisfaction and gratitude. They were extremely happy and hopeful. It became necessary to feed and shelter them. With them the day of jubilee had certainly come. They sang, they danced, they prayed. They were willing to work, and readily engaged in putting the town in a cleanly and wholesome condition. Their unrequited toil had ceased, the dawn of a new life had come. No person who witnessed that scene can forget it, no pen can describe it.<sup>47</sup>

Nash's recounting illustrates the story of African American agency during the Civil War. This distinction is very important, as it was the refugees of slavery that actively rescued themselves and not Union forces that liberated them. Too often when the story of emancipation during the Civil War is told, the historical record focuses on the military aspects of emancipation and fails to give credit to the decisions and alliance-building that was being done by African Americans. Agency was essential for community building and resulted in new organizations, social groups, and perhaps most importantly, black churches. One such church, Shiloh Baptist Church, was founded as a "contraband church" and was founded to meet the needs of the rapidly increasing free black population in what became Slabtown. Shiloh Baptist Church was founded in 1863 by

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<sup>45</sup> Diane Depew, 4; Jerome A. Greene, "The Allies at Yorktown: A Bicentennial History of the Siege of 1781," Historic Resource Study and Historic Structure Report, National Park Service, 1976.

<sup>46</sup> Possessing a vastly smaller force, General Magruder marched his men back and forth along the battlements to dissuade Union forces from attacking, thinking that Magruder's forces were much larger than they were. When Union forces did attack Fort Yorktown, Confederate forces had already stolen away to Williamsburg.

<sup>47</sup> Nash, Captain Eugene Arus Nash, *A History of the Forty-fourth Regiment New York Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1865*, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1988, in Diane Depew, 72.

John Carey, a former slave and Slabtown resident. Carey's friend, the Reverend Jeremiah Asher, was a chaplain in the Union Army—one of the few black commissioned officers during the Civil War (Figure 15). Over the next one-hundred-and-fifty-plus years, Shiloh played an active part in advocating for black rights and in shaping the landscape of Yorktown.<sup>48</sup>

Conditions inside and around Fort Yorktown were deplorable. According to General Wistar, many refugees were “without shoes, sufficient clothing, blankets, pipes, or tobacco.” The military strived to provide for the refugees but often fell short of meeting demand.<sup>49</sup> In 1863, one officer estimated that over 12,000 African Americans were camped outside the walls of the fort. Upon arriving at Yorktown, General Isaac Wistar reported that:

The general conditions of affairs was the most disgusting [he] had ever seen in a military post. ... refugee negroes [were] supported in idleness on Government rations, and lying about without order or under any ragged shelter they could get, in every stage of filth, poverty, disease and death.<sup>50</sup>

In an effort to clean up the fort's defenses and improve the lives of those seeking refuge in and around Fort Yorktown, General Wistar platted out three refugee camps surrounding the fort. These “contraband camps” allowed Wistar to remove refugees from within the fort's walls, while still providing for the refugees welfare. The camp at Gloucester Point was located about a mile and a half north and directly across the York River from Fort Yorktown. Acretown was situated two miles west of the fort. The last

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<sup>48</sup> For more on the rich history of Shiloh Baptist Church, see History of Shiloh Baptist Church, Yorktown, Virginia, <http://www.virginiamemory.com/transcribe/items/show/10764>; Kelley Deetz, “Slabtown,” 10-21.

<sup>49</sup> Major General Erasmus D. Keyes to Major General John Adams Dix, September 15, 1862, National Archives, Record Group 393, Entry 5063, Department of Virginia and North Carolina, Letters Received, in Diane Depew, NTF Application Draft, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Isaac Jones Wistar, *Autobiography of Isaac Jones Wistar*, 417-418; See also, Depew, 10; Kelley Deetz, “Slabtown,” 4.

camp, later dubbed “Slabtown,” was built in 1863 by the refugees camped immediately surrounding the fort. With the help of the soldiers, Wistar established Slabtown along a military grid (Figures 16-18). Slabtown, Acretown, and the Gloucester Point contraband camp were laid out in the same way (Figure 19). Each camp was constructed of roads that intersected at ninety-degree angles, along which neat slab houses were arranged. Initially these refugee communities were only semi-autonomous; each was governed and provided for by the military. Reflecting on his work, General Wistar described Slabtown:

As the whole mischief was revealed at once, the first step was to clear out the fortified places and making them tenable by a minimum force, obtain use of small movable column for aggressive purposes. For this purpose, a large area of abandoned fields, a few miles in the rear, was surveyed and laid out in two- and four-acre lots, with street and building lines; and all the able-bodied negroes set to work with the street and building lines; of prescribed form and dimensions. To the government of this place, dubbed by the soldiers ‘Slabtown,’ was assigned a sergeant with a small force, under the supervision of an A. D. C. ... ‘Slabtown’ was soon in condition to contain all the refugees in the District.”<sup>51</sup>

These slab “huts,” while primitive and quickly-built, represented a new beginning and a promise of a new free life for those that lived in them.<sup>52</sup> Slabtown was named for the slab boards used to construct the cabins within it. “Slabs” are the outer cutting of trees leftover from lumber mills. While Wistar doesn’t elaborate in great detail on why the location of Slabtown was chosen, his decisions can be inferred. Slabtown was located about a half mile outside the Civil War fort and had close proximity to Wormley Creek. Easy access to water prevented disease and other afflictions that were rampant within the fort’s walls. By separating the refugees from the fort, it also made Wistar’s position more

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<sup>51</sup> Wistar, *Autobiography*, 419-420.

<sup>52</sup> Deetz, 7-9; John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Laura Russell Purvis, “Constructing Freedom African American Housing in Hampton Roads, Virginia, 1830-1910” (master’s thesis, University of Virginia, 2009).

defensible. Nearby, on a hill overlooking Slabtown, Quaker missionaries built a mission-house, schoolhouse, and store for the refugees.<sup>53</sup> The symbolic location of these institutions was representative of the patriarchal relationship refugees had with well-meaning Northerners.<sup>54</sup>

Over the next few years, Slabtown grew into a thriving, largely self-sufficient community with six schools, two churches, and a freedmen's seminary.<sup>55</sup> Looking down from the hill overlooking Slabtown, Lucy Chase, a Quaker missionary in the area, described Slabtown a year after its creation:

Out of the window, at my right, long streets of negro-cabins stretch over the table-land—a complete city. Fifty cabins—Low, pigmy door-ways, open into their narrow, dimly-lighted single halls. Absolute neatness surrounds the cabins, which are unfortunately crowded, and are in many instances without garden patches. This neat little log house, with the schoolhouse on one hand, and the store on the other, stands on a little slope overlooking the village. Looking itself symbolic of the beneficence which emanates from it.<sup>56</sup>

Wistar echoed the same sentiment a year later, after returning to his former post:

“Slabtown—if not exactly metropolitan—has become large and populous, and was clean, quiet, and to a considerable extent self-supporting.”<sup>57</sup>

Despite Slabtown's marked development and growth, many considered the town only a temporary solution. Most lands were to return to Confederate owners after the

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<sup>53</sup> Henry L. Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), 120-121.

<sup>54</sup> In several cases, “well-meaning” missionaries forced dozens of Slabtown residents to get married or face expelment from the camp. One minister was caught by the military and accused of forcing residents to pay \$0.25 to married. He tied nineteen refugees to trees for refusing to let him marry them. The minister was later expelled from the area but lingered. Many ministers convinced residents that marriages would bring them closer to white society. See Wistar, 438-439; Swint, 121.

<sup>55</sup> Diane Depew, 13. Deetz, “Slabtown,” 8-10. The seminary opened in 1872 and financed and run by the Freedmen's Bureau. Dick Ivy, York History Series, pamphlet, York County Historical Society.

<sup>56</sup> Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home*, 107-108; Depew, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Wistar, *Autobiography*, 438; Deetz, “Slabtown,” 9.

Civil War ended. Slabtown was, after all, created on abandoned Confederate farms. After the Confederate defeat in 1865, the land on which Slabtown was platted reverted to its Confederate owner, Dr. Frederick W. Power. Before the war, Power was a physician with considerable wealthy and land holdings in York County. Notably, Power was a slave owner. In the 1850 census, Powers owned 18 slaves who were valued at \$7,000.<sup>58</sup> The Union army garrisoned Fort Yorktown until 1867, after which several other relief agencies left the area. In the same year, Dr. Power was forced to sell his property at public auction to settle his debts. Wolf and Heyman, immigrants from New York, who wanted to start a lumber business, were the highest bidders. Over time, most of the refugees in and around Yorktown settled elsewhere. But those that remained grew Slabtown into a relatively self-sufficient community—and eventually, starting in 1873, the residents purchased the land from Wolf and Heyman, who had previously agreed to let the residents of Slabtown remain on their properties (Figures 16-18).<sup>59</sup> Around this time, residents likely changed the name of Slabtown to Uniontown. In doing so, the residents allied their identity with the victory of the Union army and established the growing town as having moved beyond its initial primitive slab construction. However, in this thesis I use the historical name Slabtown, instead of Uniontown, to refer to Yorktown Battlefield’s refugee community

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<sup>58</sup> See Clarissa Brown, “Slabtown During Reconstruction,” in the binder collection of Colonial National Park’s interpretive division.

<sup>59</sup> Depew, 27. See also, Appendix D: Interview with Diane Depew, May 4, 2019; Clarissa Brown, “Slabtown During Reconstruction,” in the binder collection of Colonial National Park’s interpretive division.



## **The Pre-History of Slabtown: The Tidewater Region and the Virginia Peninsula**

The Tidewater region of Virginia is one of most historically significant and layered regions of the United States, yet the region has no agreed-upon geographic boundary, and the layering of its history is often obscured. Its boundaries change based on the values that are chosen to define it, in much the same way the history of the region is written. Cultural, political, social, ecological, historical, and linguistic boundaries all carry a different understanding of place; yet generally speaking, Tidewater consists of three peninsulas: the Northern Neck, Middle Peninsula, and Virginia or Lower Peninsula. Of the three peninsulas, the latter remains the most significant in American history and is the subject of this thesis (Figure 20).

In 1607, the Virginia Peninsula became the site of the first permanent English settlement in North America at Jamestown. Along the northern banks of the York River, just north of Jamestown, was Werowocomoco, the seat of power for Virginia Indians. Powhatan and his daughter Pocahontas resided there, and it had been a significant cultural site for thousands of years before that. To the south was the 1619 landing site at Old Point Comfort, near Fort Monroe, where the first Africans arrived in America and where they were forcibly sold into slavery. Further north on the peninsula is Williamsburg, the site of Virginia's first state capital.

Just thirteen miles away from Jamestown is Yorktown, the site of the last battle of the American Revolution in 1781. Allied French and Continental troops led by George Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau laid siege to British forces led by General Charles Cornwallis. At the time, British forces were fighting on two fronts: in New York

City under the command of General Clinton, and in the southern colonies under General Cornwallis. In one of the most famous bait and switches in history, General Washington staged forces outside New York City in an effort to convince General Clinton that he intended to attack the city. However, Washington secretly marched the majority of his forces south to meet up with the French army and navy at Yorktown and engage Cornwallis. Realizing defeat was imminent, Cornwallis surrendered to American forces, effectively ending the Revolutionary War and securing American independence (Figure 21).<sup>60</sup>

From September 28<sup>th</sup> to October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1781, over the course of twenty-two days, British and American forces radically altered the landscape of the Virginia Peninsula. Before the Siege, the landscape around Yorktown consisted of farms, orchards, forests, and open fields; after the Siege, it was a barren wasteland. Celebrated Architect Benjamin Latrobe visited Yorktown a few years after the battle, in 1798, and sketched a series of watercolors that depicted the landscape (Figure 22). Publishing them among sketches and watercolor drawings of other sites across the country, Latrobe laid out his ideas on in an instructional book on landscape painting. His book, *An Essay on Landscape in Tinted Drawings*, intended as a manifesto on landscape painting, carefully illustrates America after the Revolutionary War—largely as a byproduct. Latrobe’s painting of the Nelson House in Yorktown is devoid of trees and the landscape is largely empty. Commenting on the scene at Yorktown, Latrobe reflected:

All that can be said for [Yorktown], is that it is an accurate representation of a scene of great practical importance. But the exclusion of trees, & of works of fancy, which is the law of this collection, has rendered the admission of some

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<sup>60</sup> Jerome A. Greene, “The Allies at Yorktown: A Bicentennial History of the Siege of 1781,” Historic Resource Study and Historic Structure Report, National Park Service, 1976.

objectionable Landscapes necessary. I have attempted to make the most of the subject, by collecting the light in a mass upon the [boat] and the opposite river; but though this produces stillness, the piece wants contrast both in coloring and composition. It is too green, & too much made up of parallel lines.<sup>61</sup>

Yorktown's landscape had nothing of what Latrobe and other landscape painters called the picturesque and was, in Latrobe's words, "wholly destitute of merit."

The landscape one sees today is hardly a reflection of the battlefield after the siege; today's Yorktown battlefield is a complete reconstruction. The earthworks were poorly constructed and at the time of Latrobe's visit they had largely disappeared—owing in large part to an order given by General Washington to demolish many of the earthworks immediately after the war. French troops continued to occupy Yorktown after American forces left and continued to construct and deconstruct earthworks in and around the town. Latrobe notes:

The [earthworks] were badly constructed and well attacked. Those represented in the drawing, were thrown up by the French after the town was taken, by way of keeping their army in exercise [*sic*]. They are now gone much to decay; but still betray the design of a skilful [*sic*] engineer.<sup>62</sup>

The landscape around Yorktown—notably the earthworks---continued to be revised and modified. Even within the colonial era, Yorktown's landscape has multiple "layers."

Many years later, during the Civil War, the peninsula was host to many of the significant early military campaigns—most notably the Peninsula Campaign and the battles of Williamsburg, Yorktown, Hampton, and Seven Pines. These military campaigns again radically transformed the landscape. New roads, fortifications, and other

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<sup>61</sup> Henry Latrobe Boneval, *An Essay on Landscape in tinted Drawings*, Richmond, Virginia, 1798, accessed via the Library of Virginia and available at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/latrobe-s-essay-on-landscape-vol-1-view-at-little-york-in-virginia/nwEvTisWcZVa3w>; Greene, "The Allies at Yorktown," Historic Resource Study and Historic Structure Report, National Park Service, 1976.

<sup>62</sup> Latrobe, *An Essay on Landscape*, Vol. 1, 49.

necessities of military action continued to alter environment. As one example, Confederate General Magruder fortified Yorktown's decaying Revolutionary War defenses that Latrobe depicted, building on top of the Revolutionary earthworks and furthering blurring historical layers and complicating the cultural landscape.

In the twentieth century, the region became the incubator for the development of preservation and restoration methods with the creation of Colonial Williamsburg in 1926. Many of the traditional ideas with which the preservation field continues to battle with developed in the areas of Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown, as a result of restoration techniques developed at these sites. The types of restorations were varied in their execution, but all helped to create traditional ideas of significance, preserving only the "colonial" parts of the Peninsula's history.

The macro landscape of the Virginia peninsula is multi-layered and incredibly complex. There are 400 years of American history (and thousands of years of indigenous history) to interpret and preserve and more often than not it is impossible to discern one layer from another. This blurring of historical layers creates significant challenges for traditional preservation practice—especially within the National Park Service. Colonial National Park has historically only interpreted elements of "colonial era" landscape as separate "jewel boxes" within the larger park. In doing so, the National Park Service put velvet ropes on the landscape and devalued a significant portion of the remaining cultural landscape.

## 2. AN UNEASY EXISTENCE: SLABTOWN AND COLONIAL NATIONAL PARK

*“Estates should be liquidated without further delay. Increasingly we are lapsing into situations where condemnation is the only solution. As acquisition is delayed, heirs multiply. A number of Yorktown Battlefield properties show ownership dates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”—George F. Emery, Acting Superintendent, 1964<sup>63</sup>*

### **Appropriating History: 1910s-1920s**

Today, nearly forty percent of land in York County is owned by the government. This fact is crucial in understanding why Colonial National Historical Park was created. In the early 1900s, prior to the creation of the park, the Virginia Peninsula was experiencing rapid militarization and industrial growth. Numerous government installments sprang up along the Peninsula: the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station, Langley Naval Weapons Station, Fort Eustis, Camp Peary, and the Coast Guard Training Center, among others. The creation of the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station resulted in the acquisition and subsequent displacement and erasure of Acretown, one of the three refugee or “contraband” camps created by Wistar in the 1860s. Increasing black (and white) displacement was a direct result of government land acquisitions during the period immediately preceding and during World War I (See Appendix D, Map 1).

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<sup>63</sup> “Land Acquisition Program 1931-1964,” Acting Superintendent, Colonial National Park to Regional Director, Southeast Region, December 21, 1964, folder “COLO y 117041,” in deed files, Colonial National Park Archives, Yorktown, Virginia.

For many wealthy white elites, increased development directly threatened Yorktown's Revolutionary history. In 1921, two heritage organizations formed chapters in Yorktown in direct opposition to the new wave of development. The Yorktown chapters of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) directly opposed development that would endanger Yorktown's Revolutionary War legacy. Both groups were composed of "elite women, who regarded themselves as stewards of Virginia's past."<sup>64</sup> The preservation messages that these organizations espoused were modeled after their predecessor, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, which was founded in the 1850s as the first historic preservation organization in the United States.<sup>65</sup>

These groups were responding directly to the threat of heritage-based tourist development on the Yorktown battlefield. In the 1920s, the Yorktown Historical Society of the United States and the Yorktown Country Club combined assets to create a heritage-themed golf course and country club. Using historical markers and the battlefield remnants, tourists were able to golf and recreate directly on the battlefield (Figure 23).<sup>66</sup> For the DAR, this use directly threatened the preservation of Yorktown's Colonial Legacy. The DAR and APVA lobbied Congress to designate the battlefield as a national monument in the 1920s, but were unsuccessful, because Congress was reluctant to

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<sup>64</sup> Sarah M. Goldberger, "Repatriating Yorktown: The Politics of Revolutionary Memory and Reunion," (dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2010), 235-237.

<sup>65</sup> For more information on the early years of Virginia preservation, see: James M. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion: Historic Preservation and Virginia Traditionalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); James M. Lindgren, "'A Spirit that Fires the Imagination': Historic Preservation and Cultural Regeneration in Virginia and New England, 1850-1890," in Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

interfere in what it deemed successful efforts by the Yorktown Country Club to preserve and interpret the battlefield's history. Most of the Congressional committee were of the opinion that "government never ought to do anything that the individual can do better."<sup>67</sup>

Compounding this, Slabtown was directly adjacent to the Yorktown Country Club's golf course on the battlefield. The farms of Slabtown residents were within putting distance of several of the course's holes. Floyd E. Hill, Jr., a former resident of Slabtown, fondly recalled playing on the course with his father. "There were several of the holes right behind my folks' home. Sometimes my daddy and I would caddy, and other times late in the day I would go out and hit a ball over maybe the 7th, 8th, and 9th fairways [that once were a part of the battlefield]."<sup>68</sup> But as Hill notes, these two landscapes were adjacent but essentially separate—and segregated.

Race, particularly ideas of heritage and race, was an essential defining element of white preservation groups' missions. As historian Sarah Goldberger writes, "For many Virginia heritage groups, the colonial past was interchangeable with the Old South and its mythology of genteel planters, southern belles, and contented slaves."<sup>69</sup> During a visit to Yorktown's custom house, many of the women in the organization were appalled to see black children using it as a schoolhouse.<sup>70</sup> At this time, Yorktown was primarily black, largely as a result of Reconstruction and the settlement of refugee communities throughout the peninsula. With the Confederate defeat during the Civil War acting as a central driver of historical memory, both the DAR and APVA sought to separate the

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Sarah Goldberger, "Repatriating Yorktown," 240; House Report, *Yorktown Battle Ground Park: Committee of Appropriations*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Wilford Kale, *Yorktown, Virginia: a Brief History* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018), 102.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Colonial past from the Civil War and Reconstruction era. In essence, promoting Colonial history perpetuated southern ideas of white superiority and undermined the legacies of the Civil War.<sup>71</sup> These groups discriminated between historical layers, prioritizing and protecting those that supported their missions while devalorizing those that did not.

Located directly inside Slabtown's Masonic cemetery, the Shaw Monument contentedly marked the location of the surrender of General Cornwallis in 1781 (Figure 24).<sup>72</sup> It was contracted by the superintendent of the National Cemetery, who used oral histories to locate the spot in which he thought the surrender had happened and constructed a monument. As Goldberger indicates, this location did not sit well with white heritage groups, who sought to separate the Revolutionary history from the Civil War. Its location on the edge of Slabtown *could not* have been the actual location of the surrender, they reasoned. The surrender must have been anywhere but in the black cemetery.<sup>73</sup> The APVA was unsuccessful in their campaign to make the site a National Monument of the Colonial era, but the seed had been planted for the Park Service to carry out the APVA's mission. W. A. R. Godwin of Colonial Williamsburg had previously acquired the Shaw monument and the property immediately adjacent to it, believing it to be the location of the British surrender in 1781. Godwin had proactively purchased the property, as well as the Moore House, hoping to include it in a future national monument.<sup>74</sup> Yet, the actual location of the surrender remained a mystery.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> The Shaw Monument is not to be confused with the Confederate monument on the edge of Slabtown installed by the Old Dominion Dragoons in 1954. This granite marker reads, "In memory of unknown Confederate soldiers believed to be buried here in 1861-1865. Placed by the Old Dominion Dragoons Chapter U.D.C. Hampton, VA 1954."

<sup>73</sup> Goldberger, 238.

<sup>74</sup> The Shaw Monument was located on the south side of Union Road, below the National Cemetery (Figure 26). Note W.A.R. Godwin's name on the parcel. For more information on Congressional debate over the



In 1930, at the time of Congressional hearings on the creation of a national monument at Yorktown, there was still considerable debate about the actual location of the British Surrender. At the time, many—including Godwin—believed the location to be where Shaw had previously erected his monument. The APVA’s insistence that the surrender must be elsewhere remained unsubstantiated until, in the 1930s, the National Archives acquired a large donation of French maps. Annotations on these maps indicated the surrender location to be further down the field, along present-day Surrender Road. As a result of the new evidence, the National Park Service shifted their land acquisition efforts towards acquiring the properties in the newly discovered Surrender Field. This decision was hastened by a Congressional desire to host the Sesquicentennial celebration on land owned by the government.<sup>75</sup> Surrender Road, another historically black community, was subsequently acquired and demolished in the following decades (Figure 25). The Shaw Monument, outside Slabtown, was left to decay and Slabtown was spared for the time being.<sup>76</sup>

Colonial National Historical Park’s struggle to tell the Revolutionary and Civil War narratives stems from earlier periods of preservation and racial discrimination. When Colonial National Monument was created in 1930, the National Park Service picked up and carried on the mantle of discrimination and exclusionary history that was advocated for by these earlier heritage groups. The story of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and black contributions to these periods were intended to be erased from the landscape, long before

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creation of the National Monument, see: Hearing Before the Committee on Public Lands, “Creating the Colonial National Monument,” H.R. 8424, May 6, 1930.

<sup>75</sup> Hearing Before the Committee on Public Lands, “Creating the Colonial National Monument,” H.R. 8424, May 6, 1930.

<sup>76</sup> Goldberger, 238; Dick Ivy, York History Series, pamphlet, York County Historical Society, 8.

Colonial National Historical Park—consciously or unconsciously—actually carried out the actions to achieve it.

### **The Creation of Colonial National Park: 1930s-1940s**

The creation of “National Historical Parks” marked a noted change in National Park Service policy and stewardship. In the 1930s, National Park Service Director Horace Albright sought to balance the composition of parks in the nation’s portfolio. The majority of national parks prior to this time were in the West. These were railroad parks like Glacier and Yellowstone. In 1929, Albright set two goals for the Service: 1) “to expand into the management of historic sites” and 2) “to control all park development through [the] use of master plans.”<sup>77</sup> Prior to the creation of National Historical Parks, military history was preserved and experienced in battlefields and colonial history was interpreted in historic house museums.

Colonial National Monument was created on July 3, 1930. Its purpose: “the preservation of the historical structures and remains thereon and for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”<sup>78</sup> Later legislation on July 5, 1936, redesignated the monument as Colonial National Historical Park. The enabling legislation provided for the acquisition of a limited amount of land within the battlefield and a parkway that was not to exceed five hundred feet in width. While still providing for the use of eminent domain, the act does stipulate that “any such enlargement only to include lands donated to the United States or purchased by the United States without resort to condemnation.” Notable

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<sup>77</sup> Ethan Carr, *Mission 66*, 176.

<sup>78</sup> Colonial National Monument enabling legislation, H.R. 12235, Public, No. 510, page 855, July 3, 1930.

exceptions to the legislated land acquisition program were lands owned by the “Association from the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities” or land within the City of Williamsburg.<sup>79</sup>

In taking on the stewardship of historical resources, the National Park Service now shifted its focus to recreation as the unifying element between preservation, conservation, and history. Robert Sterling Yard, wilderness advocate and a National Park Service publicist declared that national parks were “national museums” whose purpose was to “preserve forever ... certain areas of extraordinary scenic magnificence.” National Parks also possessed recreational value, Yard was careful to note, “but recreation is not distinctive to the [national park] system.” As Yard saw it, “the function which alone distinguishes the national parks ... is the museum function.”<sup>80</sup> Albright’s expansion of the park service into the historical realm was greatly helped by the passage of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, the language of which explicitly allowed for the identification and preservation of “historic sites buildings and objects.”<sup>81</sup> National parks now preserved not only scenic and wilderness value, but historical, recreational, and educational values. This holistic model radically transformed the National Park Services mission and greatly advanced the agency’s presence throughout the nation.<sup>82</sup> As a result, a new management tool was needed to meet these disparate missions. No longer were

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 856.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Runte, *National Parks*, 106.

<sup>81</sup> Concurrently, Charles E. Peterson established the first historic structure report in 1931, while working to document and save the Moore House, the site of British surrender negotiations, adjacent to Slabtown. Peterson would later establish the Historic American Building Survey in 1933.

<sup>82</sup> Jerry L. Rogers, “The Antiquities Act and Historic Preservation,” in Harmon et al, eds., *The Antiquities Act: A Century of American Archeology, Historic Preservation, and Nature Conservation* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006), 176-186.

these missions carried out in isolation, but whole landscapes were preserved to accomplish these tasks through the use of master planning.

Director Albright's early success in expanding the Park Service's historical reach resulted in similar actions by Congress and the president. In 1933, President Roosevelt transferred numerous Civil War sites into Park Service hands, including the Yorktown National Cemetery, which remains a part of the park today. Two years later, Congress passed the 1935 Historic Sites Act in an effort to survey the nation for other historic sites to expand the Park Service's portfolio of historic resources. These efforts greatly increased the National Park Service's responsibilities and resulted in a new conflict between historic preservation and wilderness conservation that had not been present in the early decades of its existence. Preservation and its inherent desire to arrest change in the landscape was seemingly at odds with wilderness conservation and its goal of protecting nature.<sup>83</sup>

In an effort to merge the better impulses of both conservation and preservation, "historic scene" restoration, a term put forth by NPS landscape architect Thomas Vint, became the new focus of "historical parks."<sup>84</sup> Vint and his colleagues were instrumental in the earlier years of the National Park Service. They advocated for large-scale planning and master planning efforts across the park service. Indeed, Vint oversaw many of the most consequential projects of early park planning, including the Blue Ridge Parkway, Glacier National Park's Going-to-the-Sun Road, Colonial National Park, and later, the *Mission 66* program. As Vint saw it, historical landscapes needed to be restored to an

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<sup>83</sup> Ethan Carr, *Mission 66*, 22, 176.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

evocative moment just before the event occurred. Rather than restoring a battlefield to the time of or after a battle, Vint advocated for freezing a landscape just before the event occurred. The goal of historical parks, Vint writes, is “to preserve and protect the scene at one of the great moments in our national history—to stop the clock and hold the scene of the moment in history that makes the area important.”<sup>85</sup> This idea was deeply problematic for places distinguished by multiple layers of historical significance and was inherently at odds with landscapes, which by nature are always changing.

Vint’s new form of landscape preservation was the anthesis of Colonial Williamsburg’s model. Each shared a methodology of strict editing, but were based on different premises—restoration to a general time period/era v. restoration of a historic scene to the exact moment in time. Indeed, there are letters written between Colonial staff and Williamsburg staff in the early days of the park’s planning and restoration efforts that advocate against the Williamsburg model. Colonial Williamsburg, financed by John D. Rockefeller and guided by W.A.R. Godwin, was essentially a landscape of knitted-together historic house museums.<sup>86</sup> At Yorktown, an initial campaign of aggressive restoration was not initially sought out not only because of a lack of funds, but also partly because the Slabtown residents were farming and maintaining the historic scene of Yorktown Battlefield. Director Horace M. Albright recognized this in a letter to NPS Engineer O. G. Taylor:

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

<sup>86</sup> Rockefeller and Godwin preemptively purchased what they deemed to be historically significant parcels in and around Yorktown, including the Moore house by Rockefeller, and a segment of land along the entrance to Slabtown, just south of the National Cemetery and Union Road, where the Shaw Surrender Monument was erected. However, the properties were only held in trust until a national monument could be established and no restoration was undertaken. See Hearings before the Committee on the Public Lands, U.S. House of Representatives, 71<sup>st</sup> Congress, H.R. 8424, Statement from Hon. Schuyler Otis Bland, 36-42, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d03586711t>.

Conditions today are approximately the same as they were in the Revolutionary days, that is, outside of Yorktown, there were scattered farm holdings with land under cultivation. Unless this land is continued under cultivation, it would shortly revert to a briar tangle. ... The Park Service is in no hurry to have the present landowners' lands ... moved off as long as they are good neighbors and cooperate.<sup>87</sup>

Implicit in this letter is the underlying notion that Slabtown residents were maintaining the landscape in and around the battlefield—performing landscape preservation in some sense; albeit passively, implicitly, or intuitively. Slabtown residents were in effect, preserving the “historic scene” that Vint and others so desperately wanted to maintain. Despite the intent of Albright’s letter, land acquisition at this time was quite limited as a result of a lack of funding during the Depression (Figure 26).

Ironically, Vint’s ideas of landscape preservation took on the exact concepts of Williamsburg’s restoration to the landscape scale, ideas that Park Service staff were advocating against in relation to architecture. Regarding ongoing restoration efforts in Yorktown, Acting Regional Director Elbert Cox circulated what he thought was “one of the best statements” that he had seen and that its recommendations “have our hearty concurrence.” The letter, entitled “The Fundamental Problems and Principles of ‘Restoration’ in American Buildings,” was written by Fiske Kimball in 1930.

In a precious old building the dominant thought, no doubt, should be preservation—and the greatest conservatism should be exercised as to changing anything, even if this is believed to be changing it back the way it is supposed formerly to have been. More harm has perhaps been done to historic buildings by ill-judged “restoration” than by neglect and such damage is really irreparable. In a building with a long history, where certain minor changes have been made from time to time, there is an interest in these traces of the centuries which would be

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<sup>87</sup> Letter to Mr. O. G. Taylor, Engineer, NPS from Horace M. Albright, Director, “Re: Acquisition of farm properties being cultivated,” January 19, 1931, National Park Service C-3, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, Va.

lost if an attempt to “purify” the style by making it all once more of the first period of its building—replacing by what is, after all, now of respectable age by what is merely new. I think that there would be general agreement that at least any work which preserves the classical tradition, even down to the time of the Confederate war, should be undisturbed.<sup>88</sup>

Change the word “building” to “landscape” in the above passage and there is a sense of modern landscape preservation theory. Kimball’s ideas of preservation were written in direct response to the precedent of full restoration set by Colonial Williamsburg, in an effort to value and preserve the historic changes made to buildings. His words embody the prevailing practice for historic buildings today; that is, the presumption toward anti-scrape or the principle of “reversibility.” Vint’s idea of landscape and scenic restoration did not adhere to Kimball’s anti-scrape concepts for buildings; instead, they reverted to the Colonial Williamsburg model of restoration on a landscape scale.

Depression-era Colonial National Historical Park employed a targeted approach to land acquisition that focused on the construction of the Colonial Parkway and the restoration of the newly discovered Surrender Field in 1930.<sup>89</sup> With the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Battle of Yorktown approaching in 1931, most funds were directed towards land acquisitions in these areas (Figure 27). For the time being, Slabtown fell outside of the areas being developed. Had full funding been available for the acquisition of Slabtown, it is likely that that the community might not have survived as long as it did.

Immediately preceding WWII, Park Service staff continued to lament the lack of funding to fully institute their full master plan (Figure 28-29). The majority of the

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<sup>88</sup> Fiske Kimball, “The Fundamental Problems and Principles of “Restoration” in American Buildings,” 1930 attached to Region One Circular, May 17, 1948, from Acting Regional Director Albert Cox, May 17, 1948, COLO Archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>89</sup> Goldberger, “Repatriating Yorktown,” 239.

battlefield was still privately owned. Construction of the Colonial Parkway was still ongoing and slow progress had been made in battlefield land acquisition and restoration. In anticipation of post-war funding, Park Service staff worked and reworked plans for future development. One report from 1940 highlights the relationship between Slabtown and the National Park Service at this time: “To properly prepare this area for visitors and to provide a road for their conveniences, it would be necessary to demolish the entire negro colony. This of course would be desirable.”<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, Slabtown continued to prosper and the residents gave little thought to the National Park Service or their future intentions. WWI and WWII increased government land acquisition across the Peninsula, but Slabtown continued to be one of the few black communities that remained outside of such efforts (Figure 30).

However, Slabtown did not remain outside of land acquisition efforts for long. The idea of Slabtown farmsteads as “compatible use” quickly vanished among growing concerns that the properties would be turned into undesirable modern developments. Such developments—new construction, subdivisions, commercial, or industrial activity—would be incompatible with the scenic and historical significance of the battlefield. This became the primary justification for the National Park Service’s land acquisition program. Continued compatible use was no longer acceptable in the battlefield area. U.S. Representative Schuyler Otis Bland, in a letter to the superintendent of Colonial on June 22, 1948, illustrated this point, “Certainly, the necessity for completing the purchase of the battlefield area cannot be over-emphasized. Without this land, development cannot be

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<sup>90</sup> Orientation Report, 1940, History and Miscellaneous Files, Colonial National Historical Park, Container 1921, National Park Service Records, RG 79, National Archives, College Park, MD, in Sarah Goldberger, “Repatriating Yorktown,” 244.



completed and work which has been done cannot be safeguarded against undesirable adjoining development.”<sup>91</sup>

To this end, Colonial National Park looked to other similar Park Service land acquisition programs for guidance. Documents refer specifically to the Blue Ridge Parkway, Shenandoah, and Great Smokey Mountains National Parks.<sup>92</sup> In developing their own guidelines for Yorktown, Colonial staff borrowed greatly from these and other contemporary projects. In 1946, referring specifically to Yorktown proper and a new courthouse, Elbert Cox, Acting Regional Director recommended the following design guidelines:

1. Incorporate the existing buildings on the site insofar as possible.
2. Be not more than one-and-a-half stories above grade.
3. Be not formal or monumental, but of intimate character. Look as if it “just grew” gracefully and in good taste.
4. Incorporate only the type of materials and craftsmanship obtainable locally.
5. Be not restricted to 18<sup>th</sup>-century design.
6. Parking areas and other evidence of “modern” times be placed so as to intrude as little as possible into the present picture.

These guidelines were specifically for the town of Yorktown, yet if their intent is expanded to all structures in the park, they show significant differences in how various areas of the battlefield were managed. Park managers preserved the historic feeling of Yorktown in much the same way Colonial Williamsburg did, but their restricted budget allowed for concessions, sparing many structures and limiting restoration efforts. On the other hand, Yorktown Battlefields’ scene restoration strictly prohibited concessions and

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<sup>91</sup> Letter to Hon. S. O. Bland House of Representatives, June 22, 1948, in Development Outline, 1933, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, Virginia.

<sup>92</sup> Colonial General Correspondence C-3 1 of 2, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA.

avowedly demolished any structures that detracted from the chosen historical moment of restoration. Points 1 and 5 of the design guidelines, if applied to the battlefield, would have spared many of the structures in Slabtown. While the connection between principles 1 and 5 was not explicitly related to Slabtown, the divergence in management practices regarding the town and battlefield highlights the difference in preservation methodologies across Colonial National Historical Park.

In the early years of the park, the focus of the land acquisition program was the Surrender Field, the town of Yorktown, and most importantly, acquiring the properties necessary for the construction of the Colonial Parkway—which would connect Jamestown, Yorktown, and Williamsburg. Early park land acquisition policies were largely piecemeal and followed efforts to aggregate the acquisition of properties to specific areas. In doing so, park officials were able to create and restore cohesive pockets within the larger landscape they one day hoped to acquire. As detailed in the next section, efforts to acquire Slabtown reached a crescendo from the 1950s to the 1970s, following a new batch of congressional funding that allowed for a more sweeping land acquisition program. *Mission 66* accelerated these efforts. Congress also authorized land swaps with residents, further accelerating the acquisition program. Then Assistant Superintendent George F. Emery expressed his frustration with the park's piecemeal land acquisition program in a letter to the Regional Director in 1958. Emery remarked of the privately-owned battlefield properties:

These properties not only represent an unfortunate disruption to the historical scene in themselves, but they tend to lower the standards of appearance of adjacent related properties. With information on MISSION 66 reaching more and

more people, it becomes increasingly difficult to explain our failure to acquire, clean-up and restore these lands.<sup>93</sup>

Around this time, the idea of compatible use quickly vanished, and residents were forced to relocate. The bulk of Slabtown properties were acquired by the NPS between 1950 and 1970, resulting in a rapid displacement of residents and a period of constant uncertainty.

### **The Demise of Slabtown 1950s-1970s**

With the inception of the *Mission 66* initiative, the National Park Service greatly accelerated its land acquisition program at Colonial National Historical Park. *Mission 66* was a ten-year design and planning program launched in response to the rapid increase in auto tourism and the deplorable conditions of national parks after WWII. The goal of *Mission 66* was “to provide adequate protection and development of the National Park System for human use.”<sup>94</sup> The results of the *Mission 66* initiative are reflected at most national parks across the country. Between 1955 and 1966 seventy new park units were created and over one hundred visitor centers were constructed.<sup>95</sup> *Mission 66* formed a new identity for the National Park Service that met the modern era—the uniform, logo, and architecture were all retooled to further the new mission.

At Colonial, *Mission 66* revisions meant a new visitor center and increased funding for the park’s land acquisition program (Figure 31). Prior to 1955, the park service focused its limited funds on the construction of the Colonial Parkway and the

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<sup>93</sup> Letter to Regional Director, Region One from COLO Assistant Superintendent George F. Emery re Proposed Acquisition of Tract 425, February 10, 1958 in Shiloh Zook Ladd 2, Land Files, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, Virginia.

<sup>94</sup> “Mission 66 for the National Park System,” title page, <http://npshistory.com/publications/mission66-park-system.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Ethan Carr, *Mission 66*, 4.

restoration of Yorktown. Immediately preceding *Mission 66*, Colonial National Historical Park prioritizes its land acquisition as follows:

- 1) Yorktown waterfront—where increasing industrial and commercial development were threatening the historic character of the town
- 2) Slabtown—where the properties were needed for the reconstruction of the Allied siege lines, as part of the 1781 battlefield restoration campaign
- 3) Grand French Battery—necessary for the reconstruction of the Grand French Battery

Within these three categories, supervisors chose which properties to purchase based on the strategic location in relation to other properties already acquired and the imminence of unfavorable development.<sup>96</sup> Properties elsewhere in the park, particularly along the waterfront, were thought to be costlier to acquire once developed. The properties of black residents on the battlefield were thought to be easier and cheaper to acquire, but in reality Slabtown properties were among the last and most difficult to acquire. Regarding the acquisition of a specific battlefield property in Slabtown in 1953, the Regional Director expressed this sentiment: “[The property in question] would be developed as a negro residential property, we assume. While its acquisition would be difficult if developed, we consider the risk of loss by the government to be somewhat less than in [other areas].”<sup>97</sup> Yet, congressional funding for the full scope of the park’s land acquisition program did not materialize until the 1960s. Under the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965, the Appropriations Committees of Congress established an inholding program in order to acquire properties “on an opportunity basis using the willing buyer, willing seller

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<sup>96</sup> Letter to Regional Director from Superintendent COLO, re: “Proposed Land Acquisition,” October 13, 1953, in “Part 3—Lands Acquired: General”, folder 1 of 3 C-3, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>97</sup> Letter to Regional Director from Superintendent COLO, re: “Proposed Land Acquisition,” October 13, 1953, in “Part 3—Lands Acquired: General”, folder 1 of 3 C-3, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, VA.

concept, with condemnation used where there is a threat of new or expanded incompatible use.”<sup>98</sup> For parks with existing inholdings this meant the first concentrated and sustained effort to acquire properties deemed to be incompatible uses. Prior to fiscal year 1969, large scale land acquisition was not generally possible at Colonial National Historical Park.

The piecemeal nature of the park’s previous land acquisition program gave residents a false sense of security in the decades following the establishment of the park and preceding the 1965 act. Early park correspondence and the 1936 master plan indicated that the park managers always intended to acquire Slabtown, but were unable to do so at any prior historical moment. During this time, residents continued to improve their properties adding new additions, renovating utilities, and even building new structures altogether, unaware of their impending displacement (Figure 32).<sup>99</sup> The Hill family’s 1976 appraisal notes a new addition and new aluminum siding in 1976, a newly constructed bathroom, and a newly installed septic system.<sup>100</sup> Broadly speaking, the park’s land acquisition files focused on and used properties that lacked indoor plumbing, electricity, or modern amenities to justify their land acquisition program. Yet most Slabtown properties detailed in the park’s records were well-maintained. Residents houses exhibited the latest styles of the day, such as the Stokes’ house that featured an elaborate screen porch design and the Marshall house’s craftsman detailing (Figures 33-

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<sup>98</sup> Memorandum to Directorate from Director re Revised Land Acquisition Policy, September 14, 1977 in folder “Land Acquisition Policy C-3,” COLO archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>99</sup> See Deed 318 Carol Stokes et al. or Deed 330 Floyd E Hill.

<sup>100</sup> Deed 330, Floyd E. Hill Tract 03-157, in Land Files, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA. It is important to note that there was a diversity of houses in Slabtown. Some houses were very well maintained and had modern amenities, while some needed maintenance and lacked basic modern amenities like indoor plumbing or electricity.

34). Many photographs of Slabtown houses show cultivated gardens, fruit trees, mowed lawns, and modest landscaping.

With the additional funding from *Mission 66*, the Land and Water Conservation Act, and other subsequent funding campaigns, the Park Service ramped up the acquisition and demolition of Slabtown. In 1974, Colonial National Historical Park declared a final push to remove residents from the famous Yorktown Battlefield. Only three years later, in March of 1977, Mrs. Hattie Hill was about to lose her land. Approaching the bicentennial of Washington's victory over General Cornwallis in 1781, Slabtown was the final impediment to a clearer and cleaner interpretation of the site's Revolutionary heritage (Figure 35).

Sitting down with a local reporter, Mrs. Hattie Hill described the predicament of Slabtown. "Have you ever watched a river wash away its banks?" she asked, equating the National Park Service to a river. "Well, that's what is happening here. Every time the Park Service stirs this stuff up a few more older folks give up and say 'here's mine,'" referring to the properties of Slabtown (Figure 36).<sup>101</sup>

Around the same year, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office had declared a marked change to the land acquisition program. By the late 1970s, region-wide, many parks became averse to the idea of acquiring properties, citing the public relations as the primary reasons for their reluctance to continue the program. In a sweeping rebuttal to this idea, Regional Director Richard L. Stanton, maintained that the goal of the park service is first and foremost "resource stewardship and protection." He wrote that owners

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<sup>101</sup> Tom Whitford, "Cradle of Independence? Yorktown Families To be Uprooted," *Daily News* (Newport News, VA), Mar. 20, 1977.

do have a choice in the outcome; they can choose to sell or not, prior to condemnation proceedings. Stanton implemented long-range planning on 10-year intervals for future land acquisition. The Park Service's reluctance to acquire privately held properties could indicate the success of individuals who protested eminent domain across the country to. However, by 1977, the last resident of Slabtown had been forced out, indicating that this policy change came too late to affect the displacement of Slabtown.

The response of Slabtown residents to NPS acquisition plans varied widely. Many opposed relocation, while others still were eager to get to new and better housing. The National Park Service offered resettlement help and even offered land swaps to select residents. The conditions of Slabtown varied from well-maintained houses to decaying and abandoned structures. Some houses had plumbing and running water, while others still did not, into the 1970s (Figure 37). Section 3 highlights the stories of people who lived in Slabtown. This later section strives to tell the story of Slabtown from the resident's perspective and goes into more detail about the people who lived there.

Slabtown, at its height, rivaled the size of nearby Yorktown, which was largely white, while Slabtown itself was almost entirely black. In the 1910 census, 48.5% of residents in York County were black, while 51.5% were white.<sup>102</sup> Prior to that, in 1870, 65.2% of York County residents were black—owing in large part to the significant number of refugees that settled in the area after the Civil War.<sup>103</sup> A 1933 map of Yorktown Battlefield shows Slabtown and Yorktown to be similar in size, but entirely separated by the Yorktown Hotel's golf course on the former battlefield. This separation

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<sup>102</sup> United States Decennial Census, 1910, United States Census Bureau, accessed via Social Explorer, 2019.

<sup>103</sup> 1870 Decennial Census, United States Census Bureau, accessed via Social Explorer, 2019.

allowed Slabtown to become largely independent. It had its own Masonic lodge, juke joint, church, and cemeteries. The residents continued to adapt and change their town. In many ways, Slabtown residents, like most working-class families, aspired the stereotypical image of the American dream. For the residents of Slabtown—many of whom trace familial ownership back to the 1870s—their properties not only represented achievement of the American dream, but also represented the tangible legacy of freedom.<sup>104</sup> Slabtown, by any definition, was an historic community with longstanding institutions, residents, and a well-developed townscape.

Fast-forward to Colonial National Historical Park's land acquisition and one finds there was a strong desire by the National Park Service to restore the battlefield to its Revolutionary War appearance and Colonial setting for both the sesquicentennial and bicentennial celebrations. A "viewshed restoration" (a restoration to a particular historical moment) would provide visitors a cleaner and clearer interpretation of the Revolutionary War period. The Park's Civil War-era histories—which should have included Slabtown but purposefully did not—were clearly secondary in NPS decision-making.

From 1933 to about 1974, Slabtown residents fought the Park Service's land acquisition program. There was no singular experience of displacement—some residents banded together, while others did not. Still, over the years, more and more people began to leave. Shiloh Baptist Church moved in 1970, and by 1977, the last residents of Slabtown had finally been bought out and forced to leave Slabtown. In the end, residents ultimately lost the battle against the National Park Service and Slabtown itself was

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<sup>104</sup> The 1900 census indicates that 60.8% of black farmers owned their land, as compared to 86.6% of white farmers. Black land ownership in Slabtown was significantly higher than the county percentage, nearing almost 100% of residents owning their properties within Slabtown proper.



demolished – mostly. Even today, substantial traces, patterns, and features of the Slabtown cultural landscape remain.

### **New Interpretations & Homecoming Celebration 1980s-2010s**

It was not until the 1980s that Colonial National Park began to rediscover its Civil War heritage—and it was not until even later, in the 2000s, that the contraband story was included in any meaningful way. Retired Supervisory Park Ranger, Diane Depew, recalled the Civil War as a “taboo” subject when she first started working at the Park in the 1980s. As she noted, the 1781 Siege remained and largely remains the Park’s interpretive focus. The Park’s 1986 Statement of Management explicitly states that the park’s primary interpretive focus must be the Siege of Yorktown and the surrender of British Forces. A later 1996 interpretive plan notes that “the annual Statements of Interpretation prepared by park staff remind planners to remember two important, albeit, secondary stories: Yorktown’s role as ‘the first historical area activated within the National Park Service,’ and the ‘extensive Civil War earthworks from the Siege of Yorktown [and] the Battle of Williamsburg.’”<sup>105</sup> The 1996 interpretive plan took a step to acknowledge several different layers of history found at Yorktown, but its arbitrary relegation of these layers as secondary narratives stifled any near-future attempts to consider these layers as what they were: an important part of the park’s history.

Since the 1990s, each year on Memorial Day, the park hosts an educational event on the Civil War. At one such event, held on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in the September 2008 Long Range Interpretive Plan for Yorktown Battlefield, 10.

town of Yorktown, an audience member asked why the park did not do anything with its own Civil War history. Staff responded by saying that they needed more support from the park service to do more. As Depew tells it, the superintendent of the park was in the audience and he stood up and said, “you have it.”<sup>106</sup> This instance of happenstance catapulted the park’s Civil War research efforts forward. As Diane puts it, “that moment literally became when [the park] had support from top management to start doing more with the Civil War.”<sup>107</sup> As the park began to (re)discover their Civil War history, they hosted a workshop to identify and address interpretive challenges such as the Civil War story. Their recommendations resulted in further research, funding, and partnerships that brought the contraband story and the Civil War into focus.<sup>108</sup>

The 1993 General Management Plan illustrates Depew’s point about the park management’s tendency to downplay historical narratives other than of the Revolutionary War. Regarding the site’s significance, the plan reads, “Redefinition is needed of the Yorktown battlefield’s place in the larger world as the site of the last event of the British colonial experience on the American eastern seaboard in the 18th century. Consideration also needs to be given to other aspects of Yorktown history; for example, the role of Yorktown in the Civil War and the use of the Revolutionary War defenses in that conflict.” Here, the Civil War is again an afterthought, secondary to the Revolutionary War interpretation. A few Years later, the 1998 Resource Management Plan

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Diane Depew, May 4, 2019.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Diane Depew; specific recommendations for interpretation of the park’s Civil War history are delineated in the 2008 Long Range Interpretive plan on pages 41-44.

acknowledges to a greater degree the need to talk about the Civil War history, but it also places it its significance as secondary or even tertiary to the “colonial” narrative.

In recent years, the National Park Service has finally made efforts to interpret the legacy of Slabtown. In 2013, in conjunction with Shiloh Baptist Church—established in 1863, the same year as Slabtown—the National Park Service held a 150<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration honoring Slabtown’s legacy. The event began with a worship service at Shiloh’s new location and ended with a homecoming parade to the original location of the church in Slabtown (Figures 38-39). The event culminated in the installation of three interpretive waysides depicting the early years of Slabtown and the Civil War installed outside the National Cemetery and at the former site of Shiloh Baptist Church. Despite this promising start, these waysides focus exclusively on the late nineteenth-century contraband story and leave out any discussion of the Slabtown’s development prior to the park’s acquisition and demolition of the houses (Figures 40-42).

Since the homecoming, the momentum from the homecoming celebration to interpret the rich legacy of Slabtown has slowed to a trickle. Today’s visitors see nothing of Slabtown’s landscape traces and there is little effort to tell Slabtown’s story in a dynamic way. Slabtown remains caught in the literal and metaphorical battlefield, fighting for its history and its visibility in the narrative of one of America’s most sacred sites.<sup>109</sup> The story remains exclusively about the Civil War and Reconstruction years of Slabtown and little is said about the rest of Slabtown’s legacy, which spans more than one hundred plus years.

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<sup>109</sup> Diane K. Depew, “‘I thought freedom was better than anything else,’ Contraband Robert Ruffin, Yorktown,” *National Park Service* online, last modified 2013. <https://home.nps.gov/resources/2016.htm?id=50E48859-155D-451F-67CD6D378473DC20>.

In many ways, the story of Slabtown's rise and fall parallels the struggle of African Americans throughout much of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries: a story of broken promises, a constant struggle against displacement and dispossession, and an aspiration to achieve the American dream of freedom, self-sufficiency, and land ownership.<sup>110</sup> Today, the traces of Slabtown can still be discerned and the landscape itself still carries much of the same presence it did historically. The houses may be gone, but there is still much that can be interpreted. The layout, subdivisions, cemeteries, and archeological remains all indicated what Slabtown was and where it was. The absence of buildings and people in itself is a powerful visual for the lost and untold story of Slabtown. Physical landscape elements afford significant possibilities for Colonial National Historical Park's future management and preservation. These possibilities are discussed in greater detail in the later recommendations section. However, in order to understand those possibilities, the next section adds a more substantial and resident-centric understanding of Slabtown's cultural landscape.

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<sup>110</sup> Whitford, "Cradle of Independence," *Daily News*, 1977.

### **3. DEGREES OF AGENCY: STORIES FROM INSIDE AND AROUND SLABTOWN**

The following stories from Slabtown are told from the residents' perspectives as much as possible. Each is based on interviews conducted by the author and on materials from Colonial's National Historical Park's archives. These stories highlight varying degrees of agency residents had vis-à-vis the process of National Park Service expropriation and otherwise living in the cultural landscape of Colonial National Historical Park. Many are stories of celebration; others depict racism and discrimination. Each story changes the way the history of Slabtown is (re)written and helps to nuance the story already being told.

By including these five stories here, the goal of this section is to move the narrative of Slabtown beyond the typical institutional and academic versions of the community's history. The agency individual residents had in shaping the landscape of Slabtown is important, as it tells a different resident-centric history. Equally so is the agency they should have in telling their own stories. More ethnographic research is needed—especially since many residents still live nearby. Their biographies complicate the idea of community as monolith, as each story raises questions about race, class, gender, land ownership, and power, each in their own way. Each story raises the pointed question: who gets to tell the story?

The first story, Robert Ruffin's account of the nineteenth century of Slabtown, challenges the stereotypical story of black refugees as dependent on the federal government and highlights an early example of newly-freed black entrepreneurship.

Next, the Residents of Yorktown Battlefield recount an instance of collective bargaining and organized protest against the National Park Service's land acquisition program. Ovid Zook's tale from the mid-twentieth century underlines the implicit racial biases and white privilege evident in the treatment and acquisition of essentially adjacent properties by the National Park Service. Racism and discrimination is used as a weapon and bargaining tool in the case of white and black masonic temples in Yorktown. Lastly, Ethel Curtis, in 2019, recounts her childhood in Slabtown, and as a result humanizes and carries the story of Slabtown forward into the twentieth century. When treated as dynamic stories of place, each account bring to the fore the intangible heritage of Slabtown's cultural landscape.

### **Robert D. Ruffin (1842-1916)**

Robert D. Ruffin's story is a compelling example of black ownership and agency in the early days of Slabtown. Ruffin was born enslaved in King and Queen County in 1842, just north of York County, Virginia. Like other refugees of slavery, Ruffin fled for his life in his early twenties—voting with his feet and seeking out an alliance with the Union forces. Upon arrival, Ruffin was made a body-servant for a major in the 123<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry and continued to serve until his term was up. In 1863, the same year Slabtown was created, Ruffin left work in the army to help his father run a store in Slabtown. During this time, Ruffin's store was the only one outside of Fort Yorktown (Figure 43).<sup>111</sup> Ruffin was among the first free-black entrepreneurs in Slabtown. The fact

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<sup>111</sup> R.D. Ruffin (1841-1916), *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Library of Virginia, [https://www.encyclopediaofvirginia.org/Ruffin\\_Robert\\_D\\_1842-1916#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediaofvirginia.org/Ruffin_Robert_D_1842-1916#start_entry).

that a black man had a store during the “contraband” era challenges the contraband stereotype that depicts refugees as entirely destitute without clothing, food, or water.

In June of 1863, after sunset, a boat arrived at Yorktown carrying the 99<sup>th</sup> New York regiment. Having gone without many rations for several weeks, the (white) regiment needed supplies. Ever the businessman, Ruffin opened his store after hours to accommodate the needs of the group and likely in the hope of making a significant profit. However, the officers were without funds and demanded Ruffin surrender his goods to the U.S. army without payment. Refusing to do so, Ruffin sent for the Provost Marshal of the fort, who knew Ruffin well from his previous encounters. Unable to dissuade the aggressors, the Provost Marshal said, “Ruffin, all that I can say to you is to save your life and get out of the way and let these men take possession and take what they want, and I think there will be a time it is likely, if we are successful, that you may receive pay for them—for this property.”<sup>112</sup>

The words of the Provost Marshall echo the tension between black and white residents in the Reconstruction era. In 1866, the Provost Marshall recalled the feeling between black and white residents of Yorktown as “far from amicable.” The usual complaint from white residents was that the freedpersons refused to work and were lazy or idle.<sup>113</sup> In a letter dated May 1, 1866, the provost marshal points out the hypocrisy of this characterization:

Speaking of unwillingness to work reminds me of a case which occurred some days ago where one of the oldest white families here consisting of several strong

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<sup>112</sup> Southern Claims Commission, Barred and Disallowed, York County, Virginia, Robert D. Ruffin, Claim number 4519, May 16, 1873.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from the Office Provost Marshall at York Co. VA, May 1, 1866, Records of the Field Offices for the State of Virginia, Bureau of Refugees, Freeman, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Library of Virginia, Misc. Reel 5727/Roll 202.

healthy men who are daily seen here lounging around doing nothing, too proud to work, the wife of the party in question, came to this office and very modestly requested me to send her a team and plough up her land, that she was very poor, had nothing to eat and if I would send her some Corn, Pork, Sugar &c., she would thank me. The “Yankees” had ruined her place &c., I merely cite this case to show that the persons who complain so bitterly of the Negro not working forget to set them a proper example, and would rather beg than display their independence of the “contemptable Yankee” ...<sup>114</sup>

The Provost Marshall’s unusual statement painting Yorktown’s white residents in a negative light parallels Ruffin’s own story. In both cases, it was the white residents and visitors that were freely taking and not the black residents, who were trying to make a better life for themselves and their families.

After the war, Ruffin filed an appeal for restitution with the Southern Claims Commission in 1871, filing for \$819.42 for articles taken in 1863. The transcript of the exchange between Ruffin and the commissioner is heart-wrenching and terrible. It is indicative of the times in which Ruffin found himself and offers a vivid picture of the early years of Slabtown. Rather than focusing on the theft and destruction of property, the Southern Claims Commission interrogated Ruffin, questioning his allegiance to the Union and questioning why he left his “master”:

Q: Were you a slave?

A: I was. My master was Col. Alexander Fleet of King and Queens County, VA

...

Q: How were you employed by your master?

A: I was his waiting man from the time I was young until the time I left. ...

Q: He used you pretty well?

A: Yes sir, he used me very well. In relation to my condition at the time, I thought I was treated pretty well, and I yet think so.

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<sup>114</sup> Letter from the Office Provost Marshall at York Co. VA, May 1, 1866, Records of the Field Offices for the State of Virginia, Bureau of Refugees, Freeman, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Library of Virginia, Misc. Reel 5727/Roll 202.



Q: What made you leave him?

A: Because I thought freedom was better than anything else—better than that kind of treatment.<sup>115</sup>

In the end, Ruffin's claim was rejected. The reasoning provided was that the goods were not standard military issue and therefore did not qualify for reimbursement, as they were not taken under military authority. Nonetheless, the recording of this exchange offers a rare look at the dignity, grace, and decorum black residents carried in the face of adversity and racism.

After the Civil War, Ruffin went to law school at Howard University, and he became a politician and businessman in the region. Despite his successes, his career was mired in controversy, owing in large part to his identity as a black man. Ruffin was voted into the Virginia House of Delegates, but his career was cut short by accusations of impropriety. He was accused of stealing from the House of Delegates, when the man in charge of daily allowances couldn't account for missing funds. In a separate instance, while serving as Arlington County sheriff, Ruffin was charged with contempt of court for demanding African Americans serve on juries. Compounding this and despite attending Howard University law school, Ruffin was disbarred for purportedly practicing law without a license. With his reputation sullied, he was forced to leave political office. However, Ruffin continued to be involved in advocating for African American Civil Rights until he died in 1916. It is hard to say what amount of Ruffin's crimes were well-founded and to what degree they were simply accusations made because of his race. Yet,

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<sup>115</sup> Robert D Ruffin, Southern Claims Commission, May 16, 1873.

Ruffin's testimony is an enduring example of black agency and is a compelling tale of the contraband struggle for freedom during the Civil War.<sup>116</sup>

## **The Residents of Yorktown Battlefield**

Slabtown residents, in one well-documented instance of protest and collective bargaining, referred to themselves as "The Residents of Yorktown Battlefield."<sup>117</sup> The name in and of itself tells a different story than the one told by the Park Service. Slabtown residents organized themselves through Shiloh Baptist Church and claimed their place on the Yorktown Battlefield. In naming themselves residents of the famed battlefield, the group intentionally allied their collective identity with the history of Yorktown. In doing so, the Residents of Yorktown Battlefield, asserted their heritage and place in the cultural landscape. No other documents in Colonial's archives recognized the residents part in shaping the landscape or their claim to it.

Most documents only mention residents in relation to land transfers and generally these remove residents' identities and heritage from the record. One of the earliest park documents, the 1933 Outline of Development, does not refer to black homeowners by name, as it did with the white homeowners whose property the Park wanted to acquire. The author referred to Slabtown in its entirety as "25 frame houses (negro)."<sup>118</sup> Even later primary sources continued to distance the identities of Slabtown residents from the Park's land acquisition policies and practices. Letters in 1968 and 1969 refer to the residents of

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<sup>116</sup> R.D. Ruffin (1841-1916), *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Library of Virginia, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Ruffin\\_Robert\\_D\\_1842-1916#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Ruffin_Robert_D_1842-1916#start_entry).

<sup>117</sup> Letter from George F. Emery dated July 8, 1963 re "Shiloh Baptist Church," in folder "Shiloh Church 226 277," land acquisition files, Colonial National Historical Park archives, Yorktown, Virginia.

<sup>118</sup> Outline of Development, 1933, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, Virginia.

Slabtown as “a minority group of limited educational background,” and consisting of a “minority group members.”<sup>119</sup> The residents’ decision to name themselves in such away confronts the anonymizing tendencies of the historical record.

As aforementioned, Shiloh Baptist Church was the organizer of this group (Figure 44). In the late 1960s, when the National Park Service was beginning to talk about acquiring Shiloh for its battlefield restoration, residents banded together in the hope of a favorable outcome. Of course, the church would have preferred to maintain its historic setting, but perhaps realizing the Park Service would not remit, Shiloh decided to advocate for collective relocation. They encouraged the Park Service to acquire all their properties at once in addition to the church so that there could be a continuity of the congregation and the culture of Slabtown. For many residents, the fate of Shiloh and the fate of Slabtown were interdependent and synonymous.

In November of 1969, NPS officials visited Slabtown on a “field trip” to speak with residents about acquiring their properties.<sup>120</sup> On the first day of their visit, Park Service officials met with Mr. Charles E. Brown, then the President of the Virginia NAACP, and the Chairman of Shiloh’s Board of Trustees. In the meeting, Mr. Brown expressed residents’ unwillingness to move, stating that they didn’t want to move, but “want[ed] to maintain the historic location of Shiloh Church.”<sup>121</sup> The Park Service told church members that a move would benefit them greatly, as it would provide for more parking and allow for future expansion. In the Park Service’s view, their offer was “a

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<sup>119</sup> Memorandum, “Subject: Field Trip—Colonial National Historical Park,” from Chief Realty Section Monroe A Clay, November 10, 1969.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Memorandum to Regional Director from Stanley W. Abbott, April 30, 1963, in Shiloh Church Deed 226 227, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, VA.

splendid opportunity for the church and its membership to solve their problem.”<sup>122</sup>

However, the “problem” was entirely manufactured by the park. Correspondence from the residents reflects little concern for parking or future congregational growth; rather residents were concerned about maintaining their community.

Reflecting the same collective energy, Mr. George H. Billups, Shiloh’s Church Clerk, wrote Superintendent Abbott on behalf of the congregation. In his letter, he noted that the “intent of the resolution was to cover all of the properties on which members of the congregation resided, as all church properties.” As Mr. Billups wrote, the congregation could not make plans for the future otherwise.<sup>123</sup> S. G. Braxton, father of Ethel Braxton (discussed later in this section), toured Slabtown with Park Service officials and provided a more individualistic picture of the period. He expressed residents’ concerns about relocation and just compensation. Mr. Braxton noted that many residents were willing to sell if the offer was fair and relocation services were involved, despite the general collective sentiment against such an individual action.<sup>124</sup>

Residents expressed these concerns in a question-and-answer session with Park Service officials at Shiloh Baptist Church on July 8, 1963. One resident asked, “Why is the white Baptist church allowed to expand in the battlefield area? Why are they permitted to develop their property?” To the residents, this was a clear case of discrimination, where only white churches were considered compatible uses within the park. In a letter summing up the meeting, Park Superintendent George F. Emery wrote:

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Letter to Superintendent Abbott, from Assistant Superintendent George F. Emery, Dec 10, 1957, in Deed 165 Shiloh Ladd Zook, Colonial National Historical Park Archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

“this was a hostile group in defending their interests and it is doubtful that any great progress was made.” Shiloh ended up selling in exchange for \$17,000 and 3.4 acres on which to build a new church not far from its old location.<sup>125</sup> The success of Shiloh in defending their interests is hard to measure. On the one hand, Shiloh was unsuccessful in advocating for the preservation of Slabtown and Shiloh church. However, on the other, many residents were able to relocate together, and the congregation preserved its identity and continues to be a positive force in the community. Today, Shiloh is the primary place in which the story of Slabtown is shared and lived. It is the place where Slabtown’s legacy is carried forward in continued research and exhibition by the church’s historic ministry, whose current historian, Cassie Phillips, was interviewed for this thesis (see Appendix D). Many former residents still attend Shiloh Baptist Church, which despite having relocated after the demolition of Slabtown, continues to serve the community in the same way it did historically (Figure 45).

### **Ovid Zook (1911-1979)**

The white experience of displacement was quite different from that of black residents in York County. To a large degree, white residents had many more tools to advocate for their fair treatment. In 1951, Yorktown’s white residents lobbied both the York County Board of Supervisors and their Congressional Representative to curb Colonial National Historical Park’s use of eminent domain. In a symbolic vote, the York County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution condemning Congressional use of

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<sup>125</sup> History of Shiloh Baptist Church, Yorktown Virginia, 5,  
<http://www.virginiamemory.com/transcribe/scripto/transcribe/10764/41707>.

eminent domain or the purposes of expanding Colonial National Historical Park. The County opposed the loss of taxable land and loss of revenues. White residents, like residents of Slabtown, lived in a constant state of confusion, not knowing when and if their properties might be acquired. In the local newspaper, one concerned resident wrote, “[this] dictatorial threat necessarily causes freeholders and citizens of the area to feel alarmed and insecure in their homes and holdings.”<sup>126</sup>

Yet, even within white Yorktown, the experiences and views toward the park’s land acquisition program were quite different. One resident lamented the vote, arguing that the significance of Yorktown’s land was much larger than a single land holder’s stake. She concluded her letter by writing, “let the Park service finish the job they have so ably begun. It has meant much to Yorktown, and the travelers who are students of history.”<sup>127</sup> Others felt the opposition to the park’s land acquisition program evolved out of a misunderstanding of the park’s purpose.<sup>128</sup> This use of lobbying and letter writing—at least as represented in the files kept at Colonial’s archives—was largely a white phenomenon and highlights the different ways in which black and white residents pushed against displacement.

Ovid Zook, a white resident living near Yorktown, was a prominent businessman in the area whose unorthodox approach highlights this disparity in agency. In 1958, in response to discovering the National Park Service’s intent to acquire his property across

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<sup>126</sup> “York Acts to End Extension of Park Lands,” *Daily Press*, Newport News, VA, March 16, 1951.

<sup>127</sup> Letter to Hon. Harry F. Byrd, Senator from Virginia, from Anne Renforth Shade, May 1, 1951, in 601 Part 3-Lands Acquired General, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>128</sup> Letter to Hon. Willis Robertson, U.S. Senate from Sons of the Revolution Alfred P. Goddin, President of SOR VA in 601 Part 3-Lands Acquired General, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA.

from Slabtown, Zook sought to get the best deal he could. He had a thriving trailer park business and several acres of undeveloped land behind it. Previous battlefield restorations surrounded his property. In one picture, colonial cannons eclipse streamlined mobile homes in the background (Figure 46).

Knowing full well the value of his property, Ovid Zook subdivided his property, placed batter boards along it, and filed for a building permit. He made his intentions known to the Park Service and gave them one week to acquire his property or he would hire a bulldozer to level the land for development, essentially destroying any archeological remains and colonial earthworks on his property. Rationalizing their engagement of Mr. Zook, the Park Service declared his property a “top priority” for acquisition. Mr. Zook, after all, was a businessman, who leveraged his position. Zook owned multiple properties in the area and had “no feelings ... regarding the results of [the] negotiations (Figure 47).”<sup>129</sup>

Zook’s exciting escapade represents the significant difference in experiences of black and white displacement. Zook’s property was located on the same road as Shiloh Baptist Church, yet the means and methods to acquire the best deal between the two groups could not be more different. Zook had other properties and a significant-enough income to not be overtly affected by the acquisition of his property. His ability to play the system—with the possibility of significant loss—was not shared by the black residents of Slabtown, who had significantly more to lose if such a bold action were to go awry. Ovid Zook’s tale underlines the implicit racial biases and white privilege evident in the treatment and acquisition of essentially adjacent properties by the National Park Service.

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<sup>129</sup> George F. Emery, “Notation for file: Re Tract 268-2,” Dec 24, 1957, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA.

## Masonic Temples

Differences in white and black displacement are not always overtly or explicitly about racism or discrimination, yet in particular cases, that ugliness is evident. As is often still the case today, there are black Masonic lodges and white Masonic lodges. York Star Lodge was a black Masonic lodge located in Slabtown. In 1961 it was demolished, and the lodge relocated to a site on Goosley Road. However, the Lodge's cemetery is still on the grounds of the original Masonic Lodge, near the present-day national cemetery. In 1961, NPS Director Conrad L. Wirth instituted a new nation-wide policy regarding private cemeteries within parks that allowed for free ingress and egress for the families of the deceased, including for new burials.<sup>130</sup> Likely as a result of this provision, York Star-Lodge agreed to a land swap along with \$8000 dollars to relocate and rebuild. The new building looks almost exactly like the old building but is made of concrete blocks instead of wood. There was not a lot of heated correspondence regarding the acquisition of the Slabtown Masonic Lodge, short arguing for provisions that would allow the continual burial of the lodge's members in their cemetery (Figure 48).<sup>131</sup>

In contrast, a few years prior, the white Masonic Lodge in Yorktown was negotiating for its own relocation. They demanded \$50,000 from the National Park Service and land on which to build a new lodge. In a letter dated August 16, 1968, representatives threatened to sell their property to a black Masonic lodge if their offer was not met. Superintendent Corson, reflecting on the incident, wrote:

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<sup>130</sup> Memorandum to Region One Superintendents from Regional Director Elbert Cox re "New Policy in Connection with Cemeteries within Parks," September 26, 1961 in folder "York Star Lodge," land records, COLO Archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>131</sup> It is interesting to note that many of the graves at Slabtown's Masonic Cemetery are made of concrete, a practice that is common to African American burial grounds in the rural south.



It is interesting to note that one alternative use proposed by the membership would be to sell this to a Negro lodge. This was not offered to me in the form of a threat, but I could see that some of the membership consider it as such. Obviously, even the suggestion is a very sensitive and confidential matter.<sup>132</sup> (Figure 49)

The clear racism and discrimination evident in the letter offers glimpses into racial relations in Yorktown in the 1960-1970s. Regarding the Masonic temples, the white Masons benefitted greatly from the perceived idea that a black Masonic temple might be an inferior or incompatible use for the National Park Service. Racism and white privilege were used as weapons and bargaining tools by white residents to affect the outcome of deals with the National Park Service, a fact which should be more transparent at Colonial National Historical Park.

### **Ethel Braxton Curtis**

Reflecting on her childhood in Slabtown, former resident, Ethel Curtis, fondly recalled playing “soldier” out on the battlefield. “This was the battleground,” Mrs. Curtis said, gesturing towards the park:

You just pretended you were soldiers. And then there were trenches. And we just ran up and down them... Most of the time we played right out [on the battlefield]. There was a hill ... and we used to play on that hill. Especially when there was snow. Slide down there. We didn’t have a sled. Just slid down there.<sup>133</sup>

Mother Curtis, as she is affectionately called by the congregation of Shiloh Baptist Church, believes she is the oldest survivor of Slabtown. Curtis, now in her eighties,

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<sup>132</sup> Memorandum to Regional Director, Southeast Region, From Superintendent Colonial James W. Corson, re: Possible acquisition of Masonic Hall in Yorktown, August 16, 1968, Colonial General Correspondence 2 of 2, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Ethel Curtis, interviewed by Jacob Torkelson at Shiloh Baptist Church, Yorktown, VA, February 14, 2019; see Appendix D.

fondly remembers living in Slabtown as a “happy time in my life. Very happy time in my life.” Her earliest memory: playing baseball with the neighbor kids in a vacant lot. “My mother always told a story about how she would get my hair done. And then I'd go play baseball and just mess it up. I loved baseball. I really did.”

Mrs. Curtis was not born in Slabtown (she was born at a local hospital), but she grew up and lived much of her life in Slabtown (Figure 50-51). She married a local boy and eventually moved out of Slabtown, but stayed nearby. Her mother and father continued to live in Slabtown until her father passed and her mother was forced to sell in 1977. Mrs. Curtis recalls her mother being very upset when she had to move. “There were quite a few families out there,” she said. “Everybody over there was related one way or another. ... [it was] a close-knit family over there that looked after each other.” Mrs. Curtis pointed out that the loss of community was the hardest part, but that once her mother resettled she was “very happy up there [in Hickory Hill] because all of her friends were there too.” Hickory Hill, as Ethel notes, was not far from where Slabtown was located. Many who were neighbors in Slabtown were able to relocate to the same housing development, allowing some cohesion of community.

When asked about her house in Slabtown, Curtis exclaimed that “it was a huge, huge house! Like nine rooms. And an unfinished basement. It was huge, it was huge. And we didn’t live in all those rooms.” She recalled during WWII, her family rented out a room in the front of the house to attendees at the Naval Warfare School (now Coast Guard Training Center), which brought in extra income (Figure 33). Similar to many residents in Slabtown, both her parents worked at the nearby Yorktown Naval Weapons Station. Her father manufactured TNT and her mother was a packer.

While they did not have a lot growing up, Curtis recalls the community being very strong. She notes, in particular, the organizing influence of Shiloh Baptist Church. Since its founding in 1863, the church has brought together the many black communities in the area. Mrs. Curtis recalled arriving at Sunday School and having to make a fire. The church consisted of one huge Sunday school room, a sanctuary, a choir room, and an outdoor bathroom (Ethel recalls the church installing an indoor bathroom when she was in her teens). When the church was acquired and demolished by the park service in the 1970s, the members took the old stained-glass windows and installed them in the new church.

When asked what it was like to grow up on a battlefield and in a national park, Mrs. Curtis said “during that time, I wasn’t aware of the history. ... I wasn’t aware of how much a part we played in that. It just wasn’t something that I thought about until after I got older.” What does Ethel think of it now?

I think it’s great. I mean, I’m part of something great. And I’m being interviewed. My kids think ... it’s wonderful. I talked to one yesterday, and he said ‘Great!’ No? What was that word? Super! They think it’s great that I’m a part of all of this.<sup>134</sup>

Stories like Ethel Curtis’s complicate and complete the story of Slabtown. The case of The Residents of Yorktown Battlefield underlines the role community and collectiveness played—and continues to play—in the telling of Slabtown’s history from the residents’ perspectives. Each of these stories brings the narrative of Slabtown into the twenty-first century and illustrates Slabtown residents’ process of attachment, homemaking, resistance, and community building. Robert Ruffin’s anecdote is a

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<sup>134</sup> See Appendix D: Interview with Ethel Curtis, February 14, 2019.

compelling example of black agency, entrepreneurship, and self-determination that contradicts the typical dependent and destitute refugee narrative. As currently interpreted by the National Park Service, Slabtown was a story of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and military emancipation. But this limited interpretation freezes the significance of Slabtown in the nineteenth century. The singular museum exhibit of Slabtown is constructed of literal log slabs and a gabled roof. Why not also have a panel on the twentieth-century craftsman, four-square, and post-War houses of Slabtown? This type of interpretation speaks to the establishment of Slabtown but misses the stories and lives that fit into the many years in between.

In different forms, racism and discrimination played a significant role in shaping the acquisition and displacement of Slabtown. At the same time, residents of both Yorktown and Slabtown experienced displacement in very different ways and those experiences may not have been shared by all residents. As the two masonic lodges indicated, the white and black experiences of displacement and land acquisition were often implicitly or explicitly rooted in racial differences. Thus, The story of displacement needs to be chronicled in a way that enumerates the diversity of resident and non-resident experiences. Broadly within Yorktown, some residents were eager to leave (as is the case with some Slabtown residents), while others held on until the last minute (like Mother Curtis' family). Some bargained collectively (like Shiloh Baptist Church), and others played the system (like Ovid Zook). In any case, when the story of Slabtown is interpreted, nuance is an essential factor in conveying the complexities of race, displacement, and its effects on the destruction of communities.

## **4. RECOMMENDATIONS, OR “WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?”**

At this moment in time, within the National Park Service there is a real desire to tell more diverse stories and to preserve landscape complexities and layering—especially in relation to Civil Rights and the Underground Railroad. However, there are not any finalized reports written exclusively on Slabtown. Within the interpretive division of Yorktown Battlefield, there has been much research done on the early years of Slabtown, but it has largely stayed within that department and has not been formalized into published reports or public programs. Most of this work is in research binders for internal use, but other departments are either unaware of these binders or they just have not been able to take advantage of them yet.

In Colonial National Historical Park’s 2018 foundation document, Slabtown was identified as a secondary need for further study.<sup>135</sup> The park continues to revert to the colonial story that it has told since its creation, despite its recent decision to tell a layered history of place. The current and past understanding of Slabtown and the battlefield are problematic, as they largely singularize the residents’ experiences of displacement and freeze the story of Slabtown in the nineteenth century . Beyond the waysides, the one exhibit on Slabtown that has been completed, is located in the national Cemetery Lodge, which is locked for the majority of the year, leaving the exhibit outside of view to the public. The exhibit itself is constructed of log boards (or slabs), alluding to the history of

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<sup>135</sup> “Colonial National Historical Park, Virginia,” Foundation Document, Colonial National Historical Park: National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, May 2018.

Slabtown's name (Figure 52). However, the exhibit's log design freezes the significance of Slabtown to a kitsch understanding of its history and ignores the ongoing legacy of its residents, their community, and their contributions to history.

Three interpretive waysides, clustered near the National Cemetery and along the car-oriented audio tour, are currently the most accessible indications of Slabtown's history (Figures 40-42). Traditionally, there are no tours given on the Slabtown side of the battlefield, largely because of its distance from the visitor center and because of understaffing. As recently as last fall, however, volunteers and seasonal staff have begun giving tours of the Allied Siege lines that refer to Slabtown, however briefly.

Since the last resident of Slabtown left in 1977, almost nothing has been done with the majority of properties that were expropriated in Slabtown. Former lots remain empty and undeveloped, despite Colonial National Park's initial claim that the properties were needed for a battlefield restoration. The general sentiment among residents seems to be that if nothing has been done with the majority of Slabtown properties after the town's demolition, why was the community displaced in the first place? While, a small amount of Slabtown, the part that is readily visible along Union Road and on the edge of Yorktown Battlefield, was restored and the earthworks were reconstructed (Figure 53), the majority of Slabtown remains unused (except for the occasional dumping of brush and debris by maintenance staff along Union Road). This continues to be a point of frustration for most former residents, who feel that their displacement was meaningless.

Without houses, but otherwise intact, the landscape traces of Slabtown offer unique opportunities for preservation and future interpretation. Addressing and preserving the legacy of Slabtown also offers the National Park Service an opportunity

for reconciliation. It allows them to own up to their past policies—many of which are now regarded as mistakes—and to move forward within the community. The story of Slabtown does not compete with the stories already being told at the park. Rather, interpreting Slabtown makes for a fuller story that foregrounds the histories of racism and discrimination that underlie the park’s creation and are legitimate parts of the landscape’s history and evolution. Past National Park Service preservation policies failed to acknowledge the significance of Slabtown as a place of cultural heritage. New policies must address the significance of Slabtown explicitly, and they must do so not as a secondary theme. Colonial National Historical Park is one of only a few parks where both the narrative of discrimination is clear, and its straightforward interpretation would not compromise the telling of other landscape histories. Preserving and interpreting Slabtown reveals what historian Mathew Gabriel calls the “mess behind the myth, the story behind what we think we know.”<sup>136</sup> It causes visitors to ask questions about their experiences and fosters dialogue on the legacies of race and discrimination.

The following recommendations stem from the theoretical and historical insights reported in this thesis. They are organized into three sections: short, medium, and long term. It is important to note that these suggestive, not exhaustive and are intended only as a start. Each recommendation is based on observation of a perceived problem in park management and interpretation. Further research should be conducted to detail many of

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<sup>136</sup> Professor Mathew Gabriel coined this phrase in his article: Mathew Gabriel, “Why Historians Are Like Tax Collectors,” *Forbes*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewgabriele/2019/03/24/historians-as-tax-collectors/#512be7387ae3>.

the recommendations. The goal here is to start a dialogue about how best to interpret and preserve Slabtown's rich heritage for future generations of park visitors.

<b>SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
<b>Short Term</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Organize both guided and self-guided interpretive tours</u> of Slabtown and Yorktown Battlefield on the Allied side</li> <li>2. <u>Build partnerships and identify stakeholders.</u> Groups like Shiloh Baptist Church are key partners and can help foster relationships with former residents</li> <li>3. <u>Collect additional oral histories</u> from former residents and NPS officials</li> <li>4. <u>Complete a Cultural Landscape Inventory</u> to identify and document significant remaining features for future preservation</li> <li>5. <u>Complete a National Register Nomination</u> to codify Slabtown's significance and to learn more about its history</li> </ol>
<b>Medium Term</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Complete a Cultural Landscape Report</u> in order to make management decisions on how best to preserve and interpret Slabtown</li> <li>2. <u>Create a vegetation management plan</u> to preserve Slabtown's landscape traces and combat further degradation</li> <li>3. <u>Add more signage</u> to contextualize Slabtown's remains</li> <li>4. <u>Contextualize reconstructed earthworks</u> with indications of what was there before, thus demonstrating landscape layering</li> <li>5. <u>Conduct archeological studies</u> of Slabtown</li> </ol>
<b>Long Term</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Preserve</u> the identified landscape traces</li> <li>2. <u>Use creative programing</u> to increase public awareness of Slabtown's history in order to reconcile the NPS's displacement of residents</li> </ol>



## **Short Term Recommendations**

### *Organize Tours of Slabtown*

The first step is simply to talk more about and include Slabtown in both oral and written interpretation and preservation. Contextualizing the cultural landscape of Yorktown allows for a more complete interpretation of the cultural landscape. This contextualizing affords the Park Service an opportunity to talk about how they created the landscape (as seen today) through restorations and displacement. Simple tours in and around the Allied earthworks offer the ability to talk about the rich, layered landscape that exists at Yorktown. Current tours should be expanded, and information of Slabtown made more accessible to visitors. In doing so, the Park Service can own up to its role in the dissolution of the Slabtown community.

### *Build Partnerships and Identify Stakeholders*

Colonial National Park also the opportunity to identify the stakeholders that could help tell the story of Slabtown. Past efforts, including the homecoming celebration in 2013, helped to build these partnerships with former residents and Shiloh Baptist Church. However, not all residents remain in the Yorktown area and certainly not all are members of Shiloh church. I recommend a round-table discussion, moderated by NPS officials and scholars, that would allow former residents a venue to dialogue about their lived experiences. This is particularly urgent, as many former residents are aging. Such an opportunity should be recorded and transcribed and could contribute significantly to a future ethnographic study. Having a discussion would foster new relationships with

former residents, identify stakeholders, and provide a venue for the park to vet future interpretation of Slabtown's legacy, all as a part of an ethnographic study.

#### *Conduct a Cultural Landscape Inventory and Write a National Register Nomination*

More research is needed about Slabtown. The next step should be to complete a Cultural Landscapes Inventory and, ultimately, a National Register Nomination to better understand the significance of Slabtown and its residents' contributions to American history. This kind of literature is key to telling this story and would uncover more information that could aid in the site's interpretation. By completing these studies, the Park Service can then make management and preservation recommendations for the future of Slabtown with a Cultural Landscape Report in a later phase.

### **Medium Term Recommendations**

#### *Cultural Landscape Report and Vegetation Management Plan*

After completing a Cultural Landscape Inventory, the next step should be to complete a Cultural Landscape Report in order to create management guidelines for Slabtown. Much of Slabtown is rapidly being lost to vegetation, so cooperation with natural resource and maintenance departments is essential in order to develop CLR recommendations and a vegetative management plan in order to prevent further damage to Slabtown's resources. While it would be impossible to maintain the whole landscape of Slabtown, specific areas should be identified for evaluation and preservation (notably

the crossroads of Union and Marl Pit Road, where the traces are clearly present). Once specific recommendations are made, Slabtown's landscape traces can be preserved.

### *Contextualize Reconstructed Earthworks*

Reconstructions within the park should contextualize their histories and indicate what was there before the earthworks were rebuilt. Many Revolutionary era earthworks were intentionally leveled by General Washington after the 1781 siege, in the fear that they would be used against American forces. Educating the public about the historical deconstruction and reconstruction of the earthworks would provide an opportunity to talk about the demolition and displacement of Slabtown. Contextualizing the recent reconstruction of earthworks would also offer the opportunity to diversify the Slabtown experience by showing the continuity of the community through time. Rather than limiting the story of Slabtown to the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, recontextualization brings the story of Slabtown through to the present day.

### *Increase Signage*

Another solution would be to include more signage in different locations across the park. The three waysides that currently depict the legacy of Slabtown do little to indicate where the community was. They are divorced from the physical landscape remains of the community. I recommend the recreation of a sign along Union Road that indicates the entrance to "Uniontown," that used to be there.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, a self-guided or ranger-led walking tour and interpretive trail through the woods of Slabtown would

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<sup>137</sup> See Appendix D: Interview with Diane Depew, 131.

actually draw visitors into the abandoned space. Such tours and signage would help to raise the profile of Slabtown's history and would afford the creation of new partnerships for its preservation.

### *Conduct Archeological Study*

If visitation is increased to Slabtown, the archeological resources within it will be at risk. Further archeological investigation is needed. Artifacts litter the surface of the forest floor and should be evaluated, recorded, and if necessary, stored for future preservation in Colonial National Historical Park's archives (Figures 56-58).

## **Long Term Recommendations**

### *Preserve Landscape Traces*

Once remaining landscape elements have been identified through the CLI and CLR process, they can be preserved (Figure 54-55). It is impossible to make recommendations for the preservation of these resources without having conducted these studies. However, steps should be taken to preserve those resources immediately identifiable like roads and artifacts. A thorough CLR will provide guidance on how best to meet Slabtown's preservation needs.

### *Use Creative Programming to Engage a Broader Audience*

Engagement with decedent communities affords opportunities for future creative programing in the park. Events like the Shiloh Homecoming could become semi-annual,

and the landscape space within Slabtown could be host to future artist exhibits. Colonial National Park should consider other activities like art, exhibition, or even memorializing the spaces in Slabtown. Such engagement will increase the profile of Slabtown's story and could catalyze other parks to reconcile with their own challenging histories.

## CONCLUSION

*“Our cabins are threatened to be turned down over our heads if we do not go, and we must be drove about from place to place, and chased as hounds chase rabbits. And we must go; and I ask again, where shall we go, and who shall we trust?”*

—Bayley Wyat, a refugee of slavery, 1866

*“In the afternoon, I revisited the park area alone and talked with several owners ... none were hostile toward the Park Service and would consider selling, but with reservations. The questions in general appear to be, Where will I go? Where can I live? ...”*

—Monroe A. Clay, National Park Service Realty Specialist, 1969

In a letter dated December 15, 1866, the Superintendent of Friends’ Freedmen’s schools emotionally recalled a speech made by Bayley Wyat, a refugee of slavery or “contraband.” Wyat, among other freedpersons and refugees, were gathered to protest the closure of contraband camps around Fort Yorktown by the Union army, a few months after the end of the Civil War. The Freedman’s Bureau and other military officials had the night before informed the contraband community that they were no longer welcome to the land on which they had sought and been promised refuge. In his speech, Wyat charged the government with going back on its word, misleading, and forsaking his people now that it was convenient for them to do so. “Our cabins are threatened to be turned down over our heads if we do not go, and we must be drove about from place to place, and chased as hounds chase rabbits,” exclaimed Wyat. “And we must go; and I ask again, where shall we go, and who shall we trust?” The superintendent found Wyat’s

testimony unanswerable. He wrote that Wyat's speech conveyed "so much naked, simple truth," that it "should command the respect and sympathy of all, and especially of legislators." Wyat did not need or want sympathy—he simply wanted promises kept and land on which to live; he wanted Slabtown and the other contraband communities to remain.<sup>138</sup>

Just one century later, Wyat's despairing question: "Where shall we go?" was echoed nearly verbatim when residents of Slabtown were again facing certain displacement. With the creation of Colonial National Park, government officials sought first and foremost to preserve the Revolutionary War heritage of the battlefield; the physical traces of the Civil War history were secondary and the heritage of Slabtown was considered entirely outside this period of significance. The ever-present question "where shall we go?" clung to the community of Slabtown as it expanded, built up, and solidified its status for nearly a century. Wyat's tale is emblematic of the larger threat of displacement that black communities have faced on the York peninsula since the Civil War. His tale—and its subsequent echo—illustrate a denial of African American contributions to the history of Yorktown Battlefield.

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<sup>138</sup> It is impossible to say if Wyat was living in Slabtown at the time of his speech, but this is the most likely case. He is noted to be living outside the walls of Fort Yorktown in a contraband community. Slabtown is the most likely of the three near Yorktown. In any case, Wyat's tale speaks for the contraband experience at large; Bayley Wyat, "Freedman's Speech," Philadelphia, Page 1, 1866.

As I write these last pages, I am drawn back to an encounter with a National Park Service ranger that has lingered with me since the early days of this project. The ranger was particularly concerned, even defensive, of an outsider (like me) coming in to “cause trouble” or to stir up “issues that weren’t really there.” As told by the ranger, it was already hard enough for the public to grasp that Yorktown was a site of both Revolutionary and Civil War heritage. Adding Slabtown to the mix could only confuse visitors more. When asked about my own background and interest in the project, the ranger seemed particularly perplexed why someone like me—a young white male—might see the displacement of black people as an issue at all. After an uncomfortable silence, the ranger said to me, “How is the loss of Slabtown a Civil Rights issue?” This ranger’s genuine bewilderment is indicative of much larger institutional and professional issues concerning diversity and landscape preservation.

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Slabtown National Historical Site and Yorktown Battlefield is a more apt name for a site whose history goes much deeper than a mere twenty-two days in 1781. While those twenty-two days were indispensable to the history of the United States, the story of Slabtown’s displacement is equally significant to the history of Yorktown Battlefield’s cultural landscape. As told today, Slabtown was a community that was unfortunately located in the middle of a battlefield, which would later become a National Park. An equally valid and far more progressive version of this narrative would be to say that there was a battlefield in the middle of a historically black community. While not



chronologically correct, this distinction is an important one as it highlights the backward thinking that has historically characterized preservation policy in the National Park Service, particularly at sites with diverse heritages (Figure 59).

Vint's idea of scenic landscape restoration is alive and well in today's national parks. This backward way of thinking regarding cultural landscapes—freezing a place in time and space and restoring it to something that never was—simply follows traditional ideas of integrity and significance embodied in the National Register guidelines. The practice of cultural landscape preservation in the National Park Service takes the criteria of buildings and forces it onto landscapes. The case of Slabtown demonstrates that this way of thinking does not work. Landscapes, by nature, change. Significance changes based on the historical moment from which it is interpreted. The principle of “reversibility” must be applied to any and all decisions regarding changes to cultural landscapes.

Modern cultural landscape theory and practice advocate for the inclusion of layer and diverse histories. The story of Slabtown is one that tells the historical role the National Park Service has held in the displacement of minority communities and the subsequent erasure of their histories. The rich landscape traces offer a unique opportunity to interpret a site that was thought to be all but lost to be lost to memory. Through the creative use of NPS management tools, Slabtown can again become an integral part of Yorktown Battlefield. The community of Slabtown is still alive and well through groups like Shiloh Baptist Church and through individuals like Ethel Curtis. It is imperative that the National Park Service engage with members of Slabtown's descendant community while they can still tell the stories firsthand. In doing so, Colonial National Historical

Park and Yorktown Battlefield can set the example for other parks in the region to own up to their uncomfortable histories.

The lessons learned at and from Slabtown can be applied broadly to other national parks. While not all parks are as vividly layered as Yorktown Battlefield, each has stories that are not being told. Visitors to national parks should be presented with the straightforward narratives of the landscapes they visit. All visitors are able to understand multiple layers in the same cultural landscape and should be afforded the opportunity, through careful interpretation and preservation, to understand the implications of landscape editing on their national parks.

Colonial National Historical Park's land files from eminent domain and land acquisition proceedings offer the most complete record of Slabtown's physical past, yet they also leave out much. Seldom are residents featured in the photos of their houses and when they are, they are in the background. This leaves out the residents' lived experience of places and in many ways justified their removal. As historians, preservationists, and planners, we need to augment the historical record while we still can, adding data to correct the intentional omissions of our predecessors. Oral histories record and address the injustices and edits of our predecessors. By interviewing residents on their terms, we can empower and give voice to Slabtown's descendant communities that are still very much present near the battlefield. Cultural landscape thinking, when paired with tools that recognize the validity of multiple significances and allow for change, can be the solution to many of the problems faced by the preservation world today.

As preservation professionals, we need to question what values we are prioritizing in our work, and to what end. Future generations will inevitably question the results of

the decisions we make, just as I am questioning the decisions of previous Park Service officials at Yorktown Battlefield. This constant questioning of past decisions can be frustrating; as societal values change, so too do the perceived ‘right choices.’ However, at the very least, preservationists need to be able to substantiate the decisions they made and should follow the maxim to “first do no harm.” By taking the time to question the decisions at hand and fully consider the consequences of their actions on any change to the landscape, professionals can avoid the mistakes made in the razing of Slabtown.

At its best, cultural landscape preservation accounts for the depth of time and holds the significance of a site to be multi-layered, diverse, and inclusive. The story of Slabtown is one of multiple generations and multiple lifetimes. It is a story that illustrates how the National Park Service has historically ignored narratives other than the one they hold as dominant and it is a case that shows how modern cultural landscape practices fail to square up with theory. Slabtown is a cautionary tale of how a more progressive understanding of significance should have been used to nuance the understanding of a landscape. Practitioners of landscape preservation must be held accountable for what measures are taken when historic fabric is destroyed today, and they must also take responsibility for reporting on and responding to landscape edits of their predecessors.

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## Appendix A: Figures



*Figure 1.* The restored Yorktown Battlefield features reconstructed earthworks and artillery. (Torkelson, 2019)

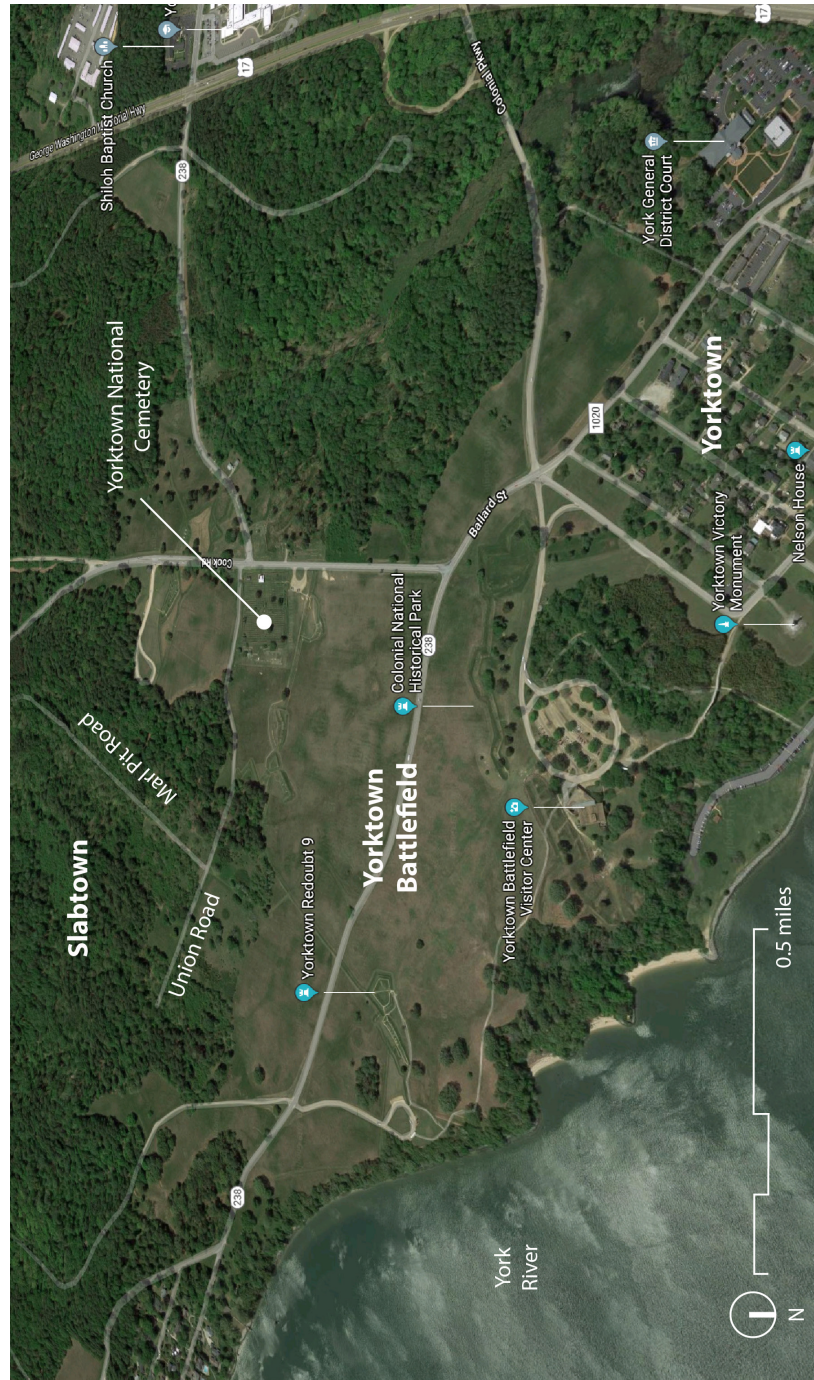


Figure 2. Aerial view of the greater Yorktown Battlefield area. Note the location of Slabtown in relation to Yorktown. (Google Maps, 2018)





*Figure 3.* View of several reconstructed earthworks and the wooded area behind them that contains the landscape traces of Slabtown. (Torkelson, 2018)



*Figure 4.* View of Union Road entering Slabtown. Note the black Masonic cemetery and the brick wall of the National Cemetery. (Torkelson, 2018)





*Figure 5.* Panorama of the entrance to Slabtown along Union Road. Note the abrupt change between the restored battlefield (left) and Slabtown (right). (Torkelson, 2018)



*Figure 6.* Slabtown's Masonic cemetery, outside the walls of the National Cemetery, is an excellent example of a landscape trace. (Torkelson, 2019)





*Figure 7.* Landscape traces like these brick footings litter the forest floor.  
(Torkelson, 2019)



*Figure 8.* Among the most powerful landscape traces are linear groves of trees that mark the former lot lines between houses. (Torkelson, 2018)





*Figure 9.* Marl Pit Road is rapidly being overtaken by vegetation. (Torkelson, 2018)



*Figure 10.* Pictured is the former main intersection of Slabtown at Union Road and Marl Pit Road. The asphalt is still easily discernible. (Torkelson, 2018)

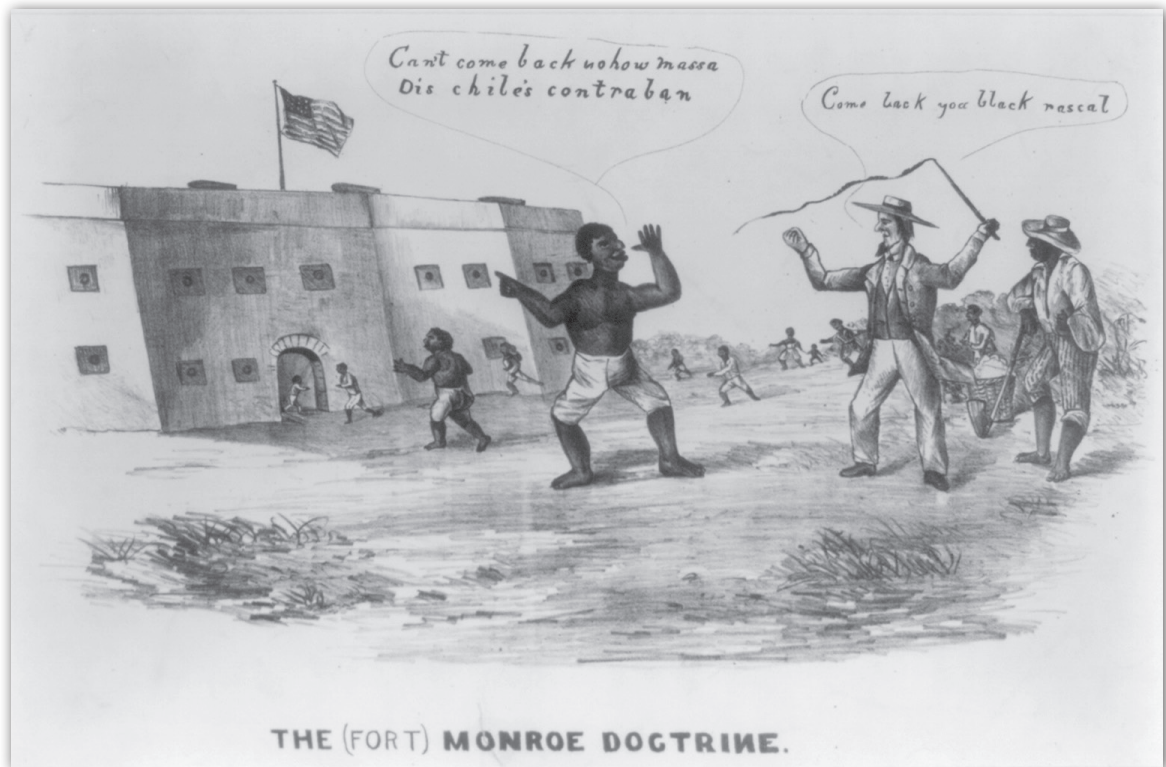


Figure 11. An 1861 political cartoon shows refugees or “contraband” escaping to Fort Monroe. (Library of Congress)





*Figure 12.* The Grand Contraband Camp in Hampton, Virginia was one of the largest in the country. Refugees used chimneys and other burned remains of Hampton houses to construct houses after the battle. (Library of Congress, 1864)

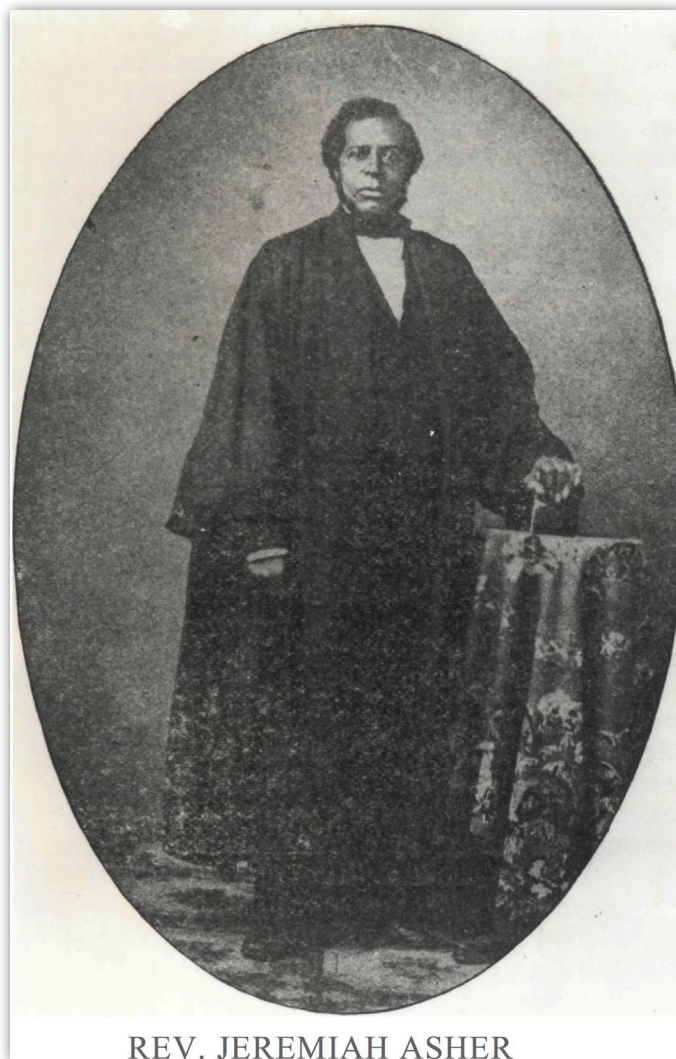




Figure 13. An 1864 sketch of refugees traveling to Union lines. (Library of Congress)



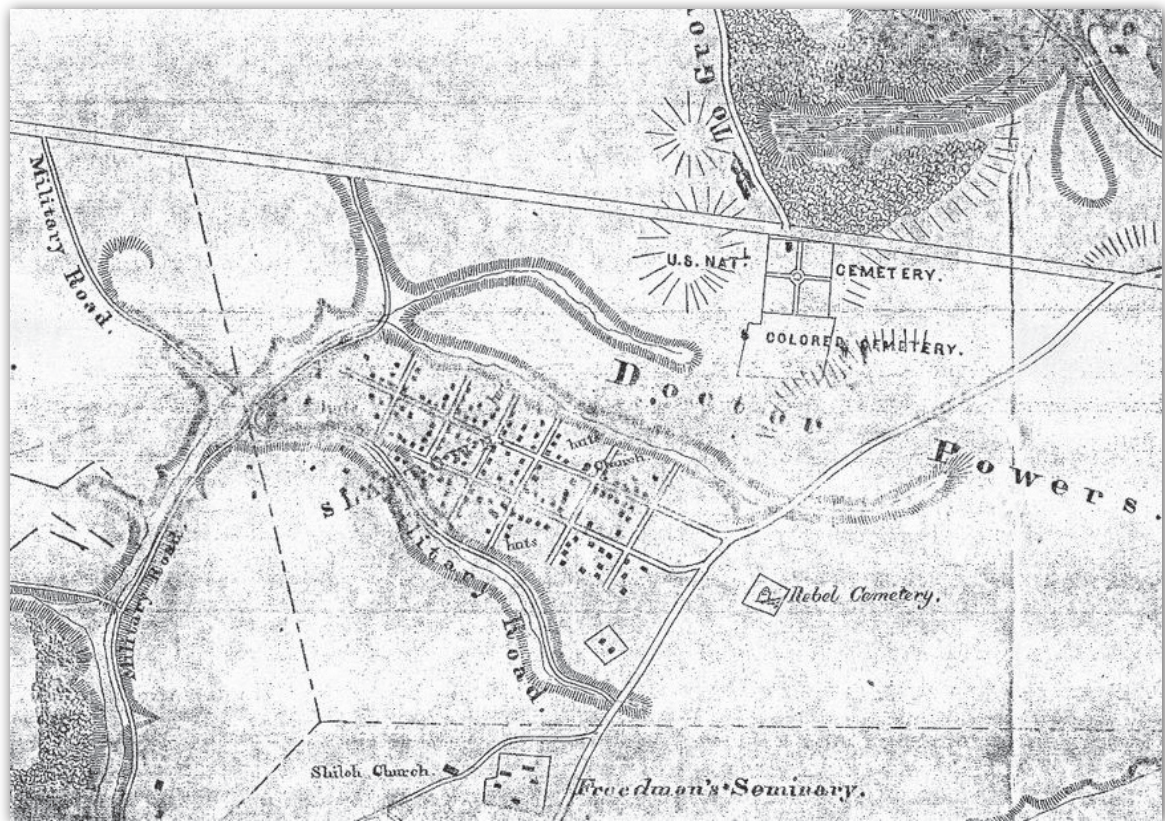
Figure 14. Refugees, or "contraband," at Yorktown prior to the construction of Slabtown in 1863. (Library of Congress)



REV. JEREMIAH ASHER

*Figure 15.* The Reverend Jeremiah Asher.  
(Courtesy of Shiloh Baptist Church, Philadelphia)





*Figure 16. 1866 Map of Slabtown. Note the seminary, Shiloh church, the military street grid, numerous “huts,” and the already extant “colored cemetery” (later the Masonic Cemetery) south of the U.S. National Cemetery.*  
 (Map courtesy of the National Archives)

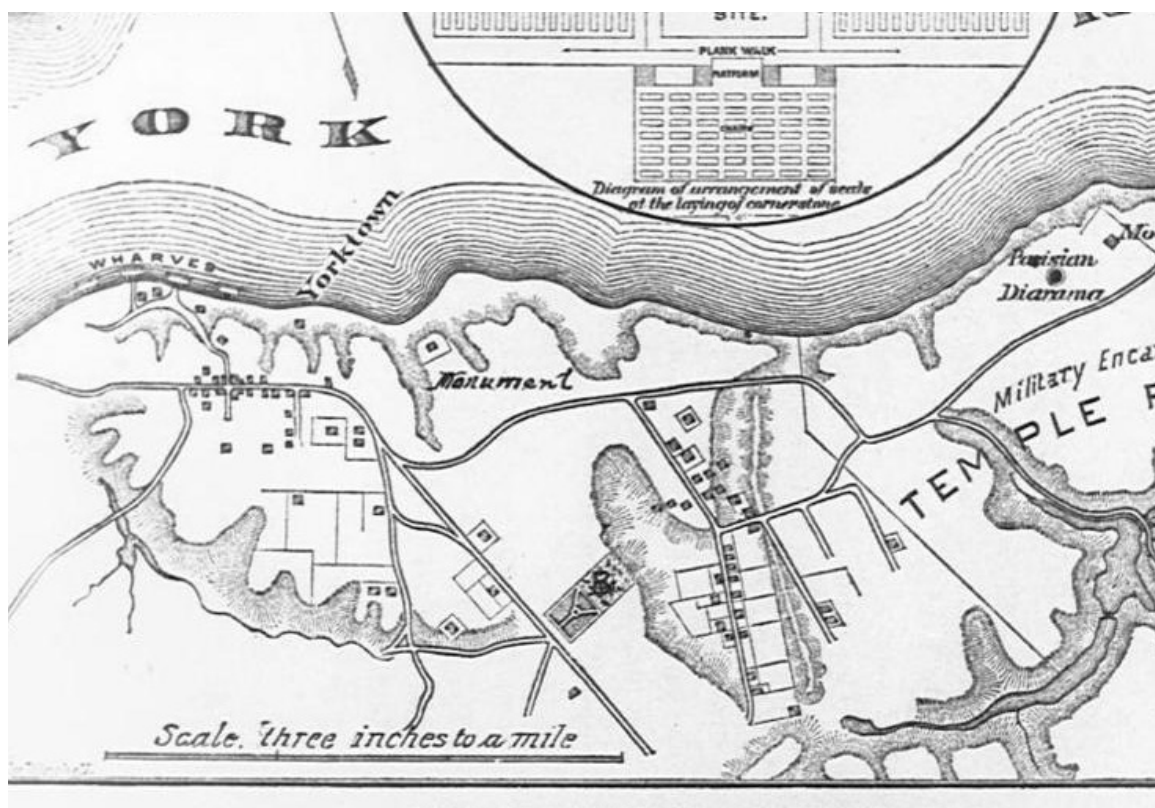


Figure 17. 1881 Map of Yorktown (left), showing Slabtown (center). Note that both Yorktown and Slabtown were similar in size and had a comparable number of dwellings at this time. (Colonial National Historical Park)



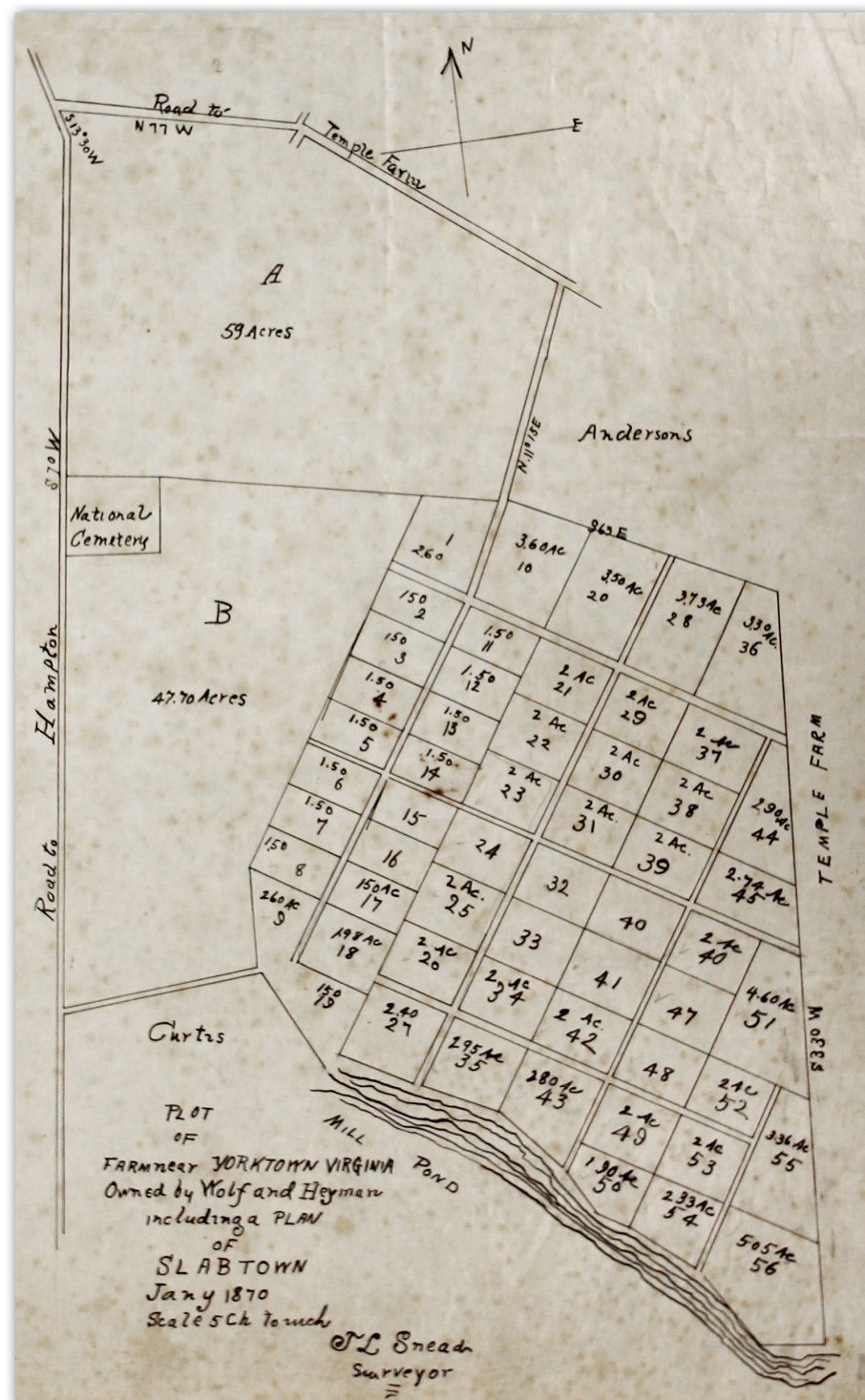
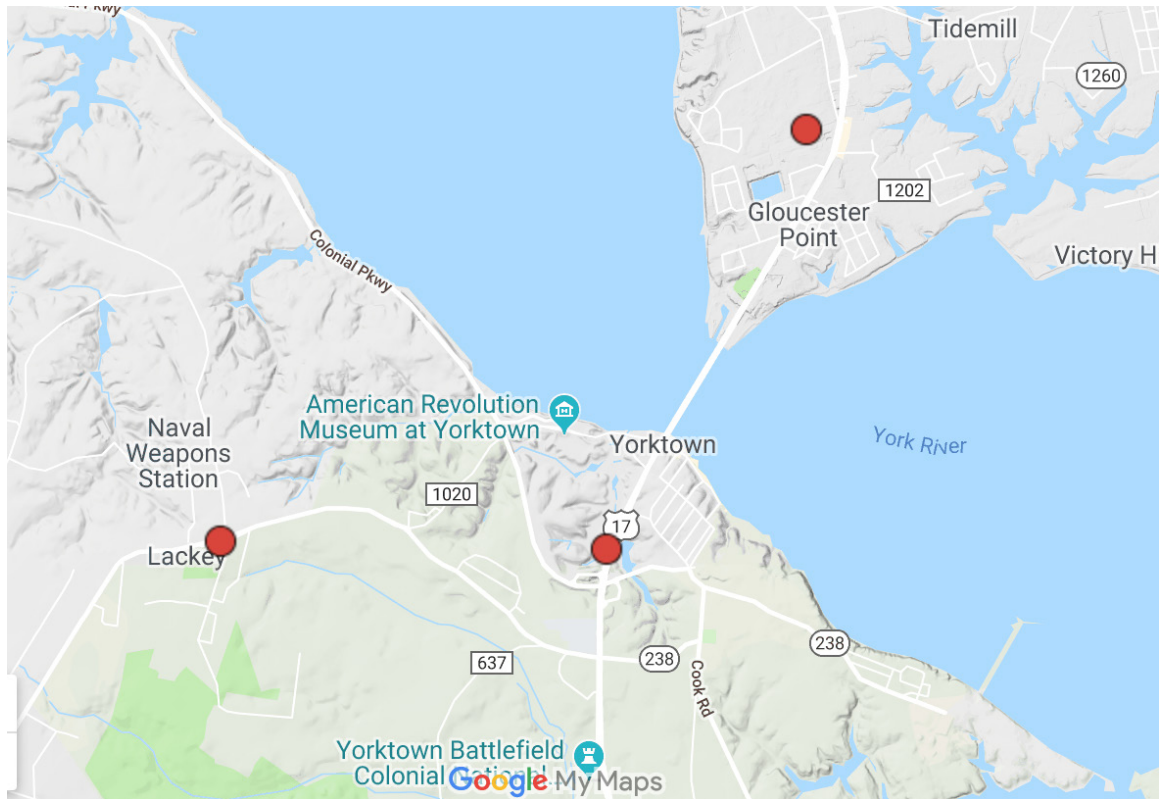


Figure 18. 1870 Snead Map of Slabtown. Note the owners were Wolf and Heyman. (Colonial National Historical Park)



*Figure 19.* Approximate locations of the three contraband camps established by General Wistar in 1863: Acretown (left), Gloucester Point (top), and Slabtown (center).

(Data from Abigail Cooper, “Lord Until I Reach my Home,” available at: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1awfJs1EtU6amxUdPPCFZdH7b8dk&ll=34.459843087674365%2C-87.36201965574958&z=5>)



*Figure 20. Map of the Tidewater Virginia.*  
 (Map by Andrew Wiseman, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Virginia-peninsula.png>, CC BY 3.0)





*Figure 21. The Surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, A.D. 1781.*  
(Library of Congress)





*Figure 22. Watercolor of the Nelson House at Yorktown painted by Benjamin Latrobe in 1798. (Library of Virginia Special Collections)*



*Figure 23.* 1924 Aerial photograph of the Yorktown Country Club and golf course. In the upper right corner is the edge of Slabtown. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)





*Figure 24.* The Shaw Monument was located at the edge of the National Cemetery along Union road leading into Slabtown. Shaw, the superintendent of the National Cemetery, believed it to be the location of the Surrender of General Cornwallis in 1781. It was removed by Colonial National Historical park in 1934.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)



*Figure 25.* The Surrender Road community was another historically-black community on Yorktown Battlefield. Much of it was acquired and demolished for the 1931 Sesquicentennial Celebration. The original caption of this photo reads, “nondescript buildings of all types on Surrender Road.” February, 1940.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)







*Figure 27. 1931 Sesquicentennial Celebration. The grid of Slabtown is seen in the upper right, near the York River. Yorktown is in the upper left along the river. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)*

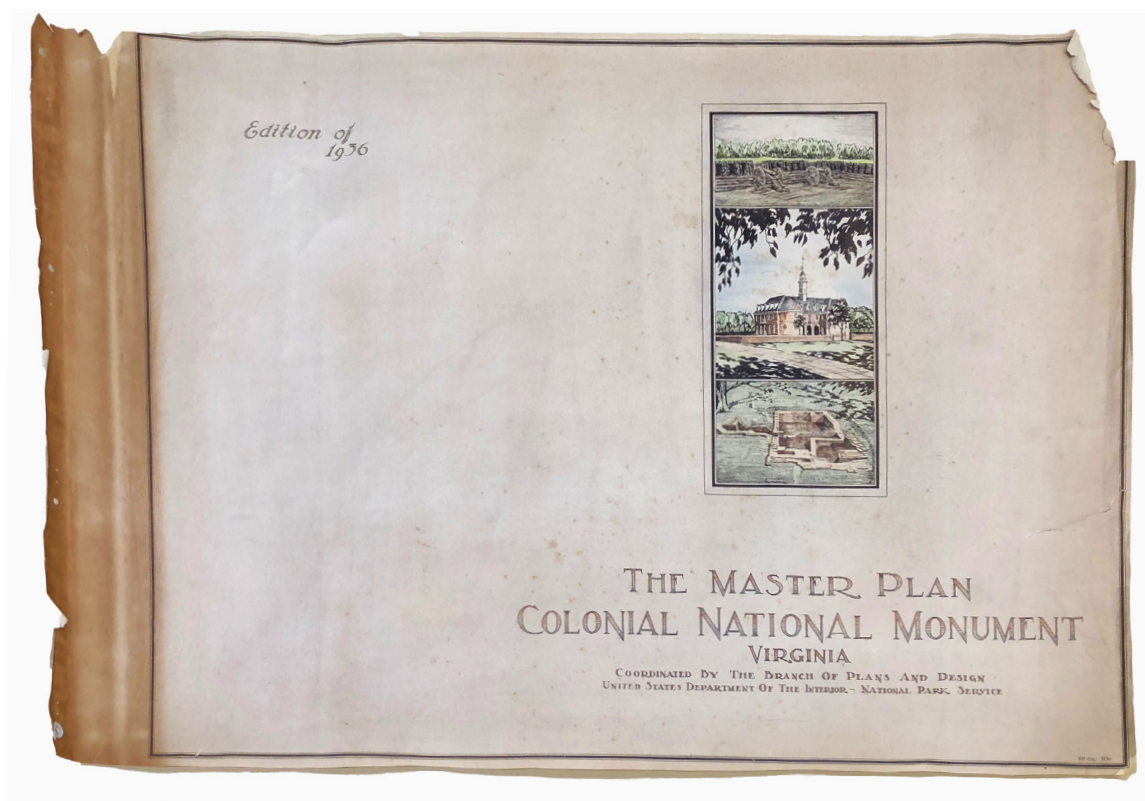


Figure 28. Cover sheet for the Colonial National Monument master plan of 1936.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)





Figure 29. The 1936 master plan shows significant private landholdings on the Yorktown battlefield, including Slabtown (dark green). Light green properties were owned by the park. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)





*Figure 30.* 1920s aerial photograph of Slabtown. Note the presence of the original Slabtown grid, the battlefield golf course at the top of the photograph, and the numerous farms in Slabtown. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)

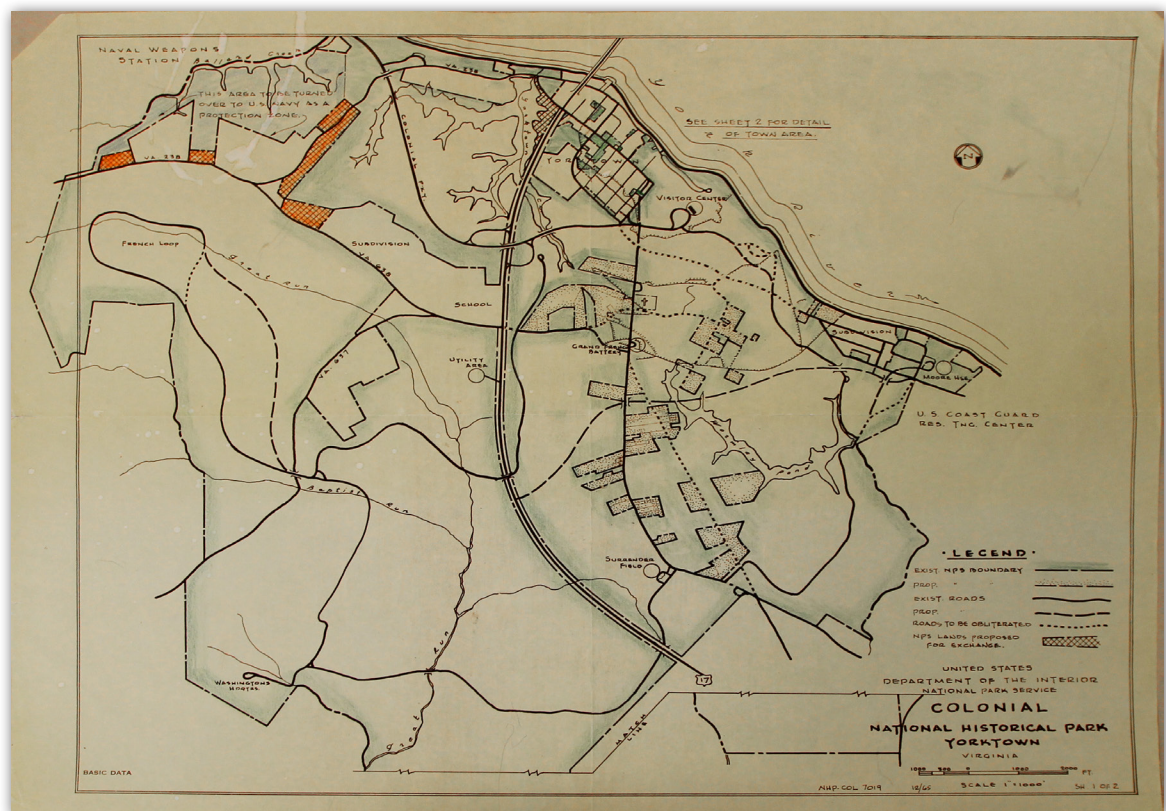


Figure 31. 1965 Land Acquisition Map. Properties with a dotted hash were still in private ownership at this time. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)







Figure 33. The Braxton House was one of the more substantial houses in Slabtown.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)



Figure 34. The Marshall house featured a trendy bungalow design and a small garden.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)



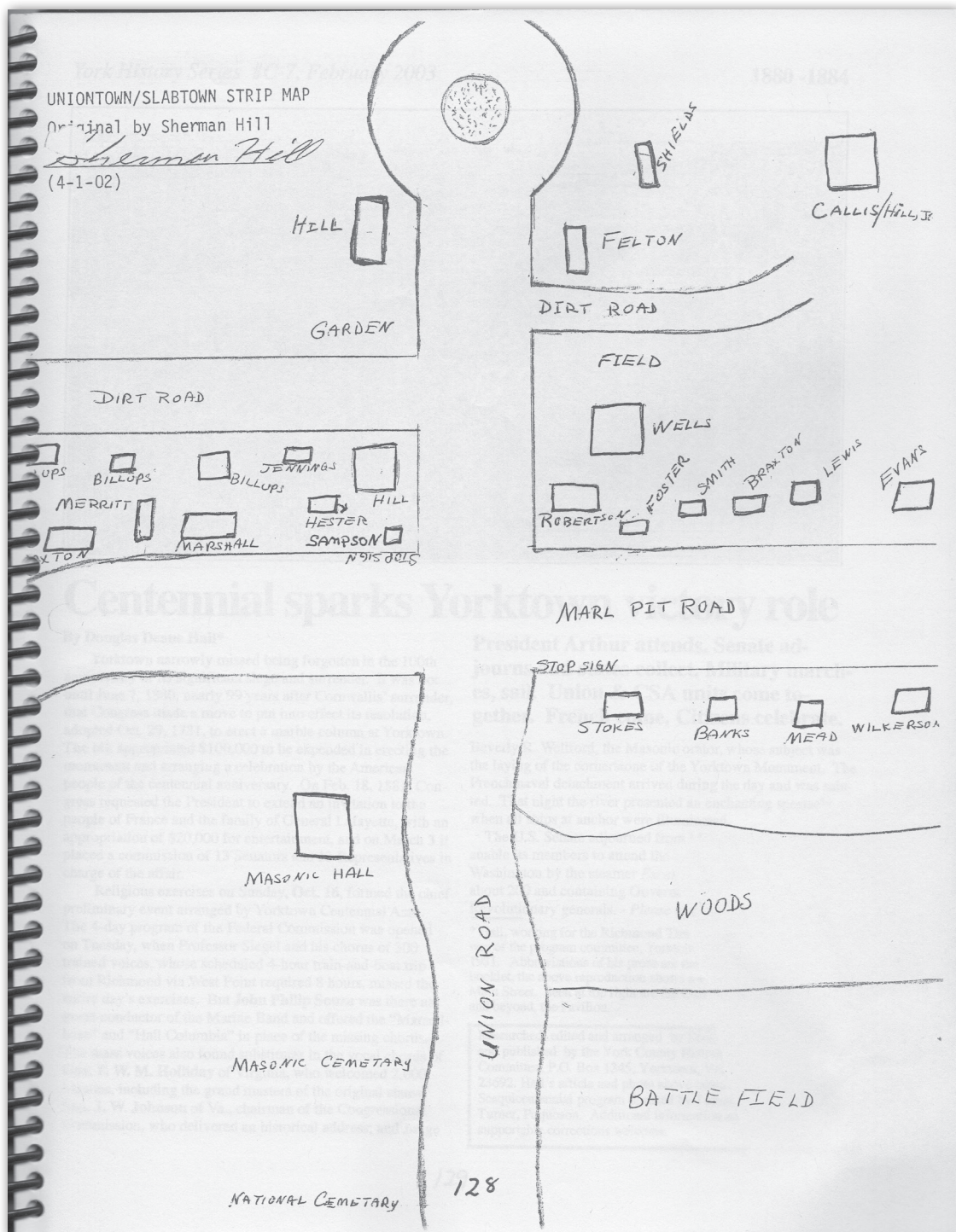


Figure 35. A map drawn by former Slabtown resident Sherman Hill. (Dick Ivy, York History Series, pamphlet, York County Historical Society, 128)



Figure 36. A 1977 news-clipping about displacement on Yorktown Battlefield.  
 (Daily Press, March 20, 1977)





*Figure 37. Various photos of Slabtown buildings. (Left to right) Debney/Wormley estate (1977); Shiloh Baptist Church (1966); Marshall House (1966); Braxton House (1970); Geo Billups House (1966); Carol Stokes House (1977); “unsightly building originally a colored dance hall” (1930s); York Star Masonic Lodge (1960); and Hopson’s store (1963). (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)*



*Figure 38.* Members of Shiloh Baptist church and NPS officials reveal the new Slabtown waysides at a homecoming celebration in 2013.  
(Courtesy The Shiloh Experience via Facebook)





*Figure 39.* Members of Shiloh Baptist Church look at the new Slabtown and Shiloh Baptist Church waysides at a homecoming celebration in 2013.  
(Courtesy The Shiloh Experience via Facebook)



*Figure 40.* Slabtown's interpretive waysides are located far away from the landscape traces of Slabtown. (Torkelson, 2018)



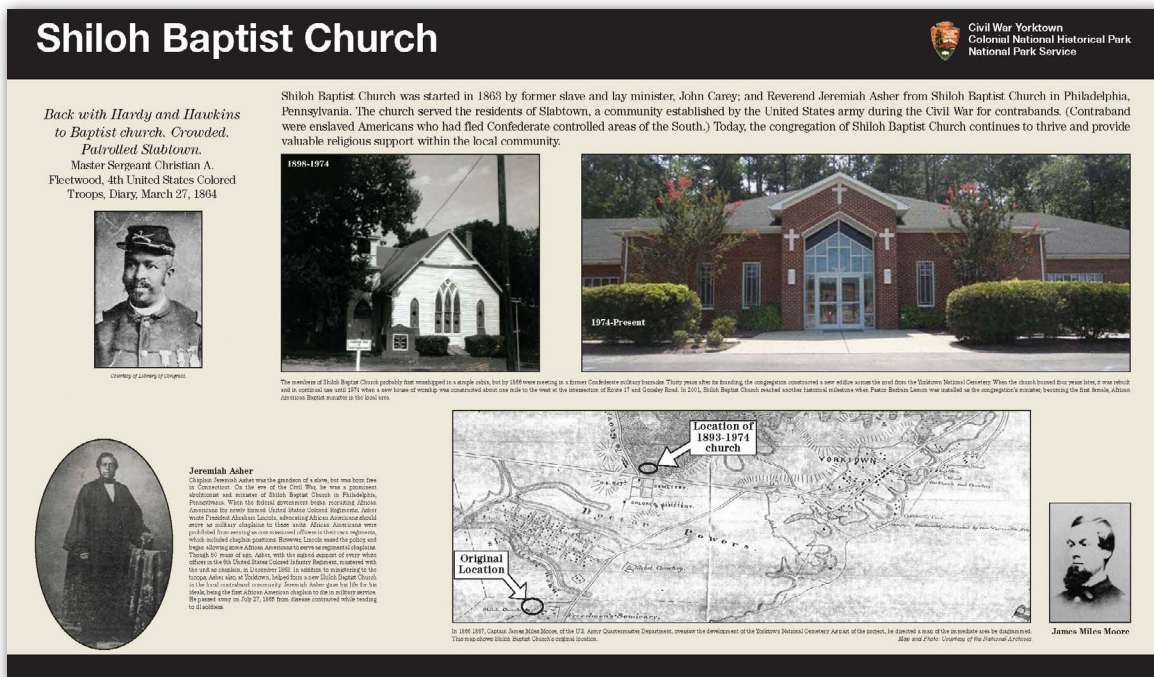


Figure 41. The Shiloh Baptist Church wayside. (Colonial National Historical Park)

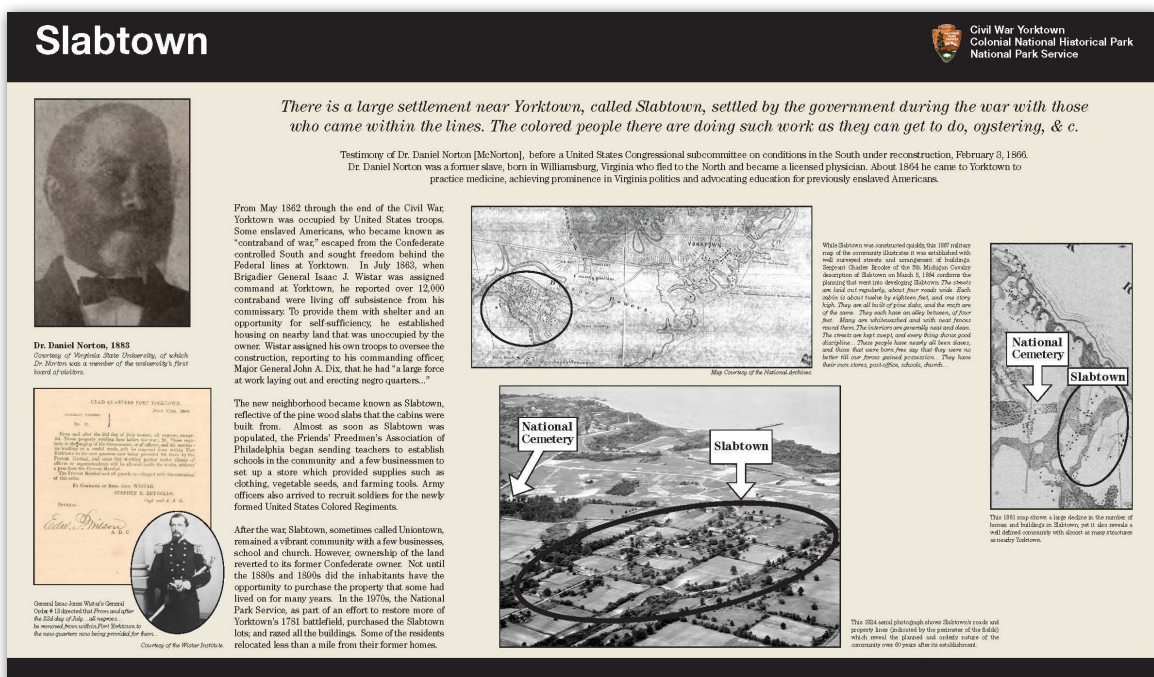


Figure 42. The Slabtown wayside. (Colonial National Historical Park)

owned large holdings in coal, oil and timber lands worth millions of dollars of his own.

The president of one of the wealthiest companies in this city or the West sent a message to Mr.



President, Col. R. D. Ruffin.

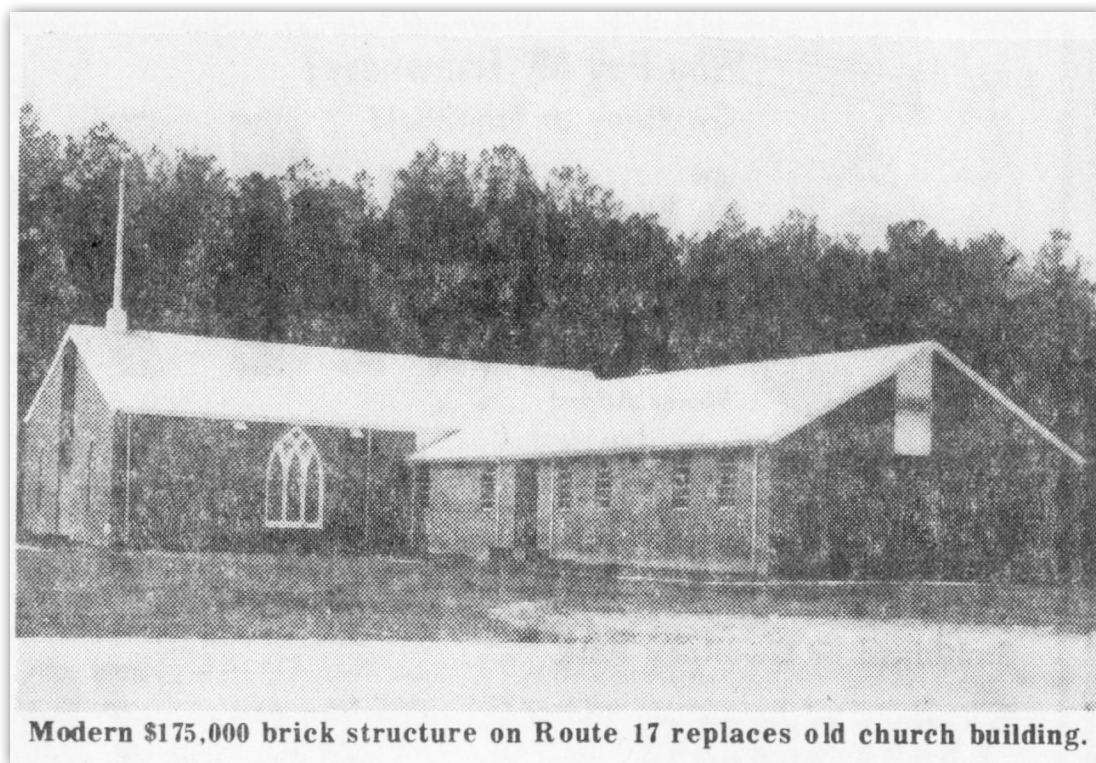
Chancellor, the attorney, that his company was in full sympathy with the organization of which Col. Ruffin is president, and that his company would stand back of it, which means many

Figure 43. Robert D. Ruffin. (Encyclopedia Virginia)



*Figure 44. Shiloh Baptist Church during an assessment in 1966.*  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)





*Figure 45. New Shiloh Baptist Church as built in 1974. (Daily Press, April 24, 1974)*



*Figure 46.* Zook's trailer park (in the background) was near the Grand French Battery, a restored earthwork. The adjacencies in this 1954 photo shows the complex layering of the battlefield's cultural landscape. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)

Mr. Harriman  
Regional Director, Region

The attached is our best effort to prevent damages to probable earthwork remains on Tract 268-2. Mr. Zook has batterboards in place, building permit notice posted, and advised me upon inquiry that he planned bulldozing operations to start April 21. He has agreed to suspend these operations until April 28.

G.F.E.

*Figure 47. A 1958 memo from Superintendent George F. Emery regarding Zook's threat to destroy the earthworks on his property if the park did not meet his offer.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)*





*Figure 48. Slabtown's York Star Masonic Lodge during an appraisal in 1960.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)*

It is interesting to note that one alternative use proposed by the membership would be to sell this to a Negro lodge. This was not offered to me in the form of a threat but I could see that some of the membership consider it as such. Obviously, even the suggestion is a very sensitive and confidential matter.

**SIGNED**

James W. Corson

In duplicate

*Figure 49. Letter from Superintendent James W. Corson regarding a meeting with the white Masonic Lodge in Yorktown. (Colonial National Historical Park Archives)*



*Figure 50. Ethel Curtis (left) and Cassie Phillips (right) at Shiloh Baptist Church.  
(Torkelson, 2019)*



*Figure 51.* An undated aerial photograph of the Braxton and Marshall Houses along Marl Pit Road in Slabtown. Note the linear lines of trees that divide adjacent lots. These trees, as well as the roads, are extant.  
(Colonial National Historical Park Archives)





Figure 52. The Slabtown exhibit in the National Cemetery Lodge. (Torkelson, 2019)



*Figure 53.* The restored earthworks left a literal scar on the landscape. This picture was taken in 1980/1981, only a few years after the last resident left Slabtown. Note the Masonic cemetery at right and Union road running across the top of the photo.  
(Colonial National Historical Park)





*Figure 54.* Aerial views of the intersection of Union Road and Marl Pit Road in Slabtown. The vegetation and grid patterns of Slabtown are still easily discernible in these aerial photographs from 2018 (left) and the USGS (1970). More study is needed to determine which landscape traces are significant. (Google Earth 2018 and USGS, 1970)



*Figure 55.* A second aerial view of the intersection of Union Road and Marl Pit Road in Slabtown showing the restored earthworks. Note the legibility of the open spaces that were former residences. (Google Earth, 2018 and USGS, 1970)





*Figure 56.* A wheelbarrow found in the woods of Slabtown is one of many artifacts that litter the forest floor. (Torkelson, 2018)



*Figure 57.* An enamel basis found near the former Hill house. (Torkelson, 2019)





*Figure 58.* A brick chimney located near the intersection of Union and Marl Pit Roads.  
(Torkelson, 2018)



*Figure 59.* A renaming proposal for “Slabtown National Historical Site and Yorktown Battlefield.” (Torkelson, 2018; modified from <https://www.nps.gov/york/index.htm>)

## Appendix B: Slabtown Chronology

Year	Event	Annotation
1619	Arrived	The first enslaved Africans arrive at Old Point Comfort (now Fort Monroe).
1691	Platted	The Town of York is platted. The port exported tobacco, imported goods like sugar, and trafficked in the sale of enslaved Africans.
1699-1734	Built	The first earthworks are built. <sup>139</sup>
1777	Built	Colonists build more fortifications after the American Revolution. <sup>140</sup>
1781	Military Operation	Battle of Yorktown (September 28-October 19).
	Planned	Congress authorized a monument to commemorate the Battle of Yorktown, just 10 days after the siege ended. It was the first monument authorized by congress. <sup>141</sup>
	Demolished	General Washington ordered the destruction of all Allied earthworks on October 20, fearing their use against Allied forces. The British earthworks remained. <sup>142</sup>
1861	Military Operation	The Civil War begins in April 12 at the Battle of Fort Sumner.
1861-1864	Built/Altered	The Confederate Army constructs defensive earthworks atop the remnants of the British

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<sup>139</sup> Eric N. Thompson, "The British Defense of 1781," Historic Resource Study, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 1976.

<sup>140</sup> Heritage Landscapes, "Yorktown," Cultural Landscapes Inventory, Colonial National Historical Park, 1999: 22.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Greene, "The Allies at Yorktown," 1976: 348-350.

		Revolutionary War earthworks during the Peninsula Campaign. <sup>143</sup>
1861	Established	On May 23, Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend escaped to Fort Monroe, becoming the first "contrabands."
	Established	On August 23, General Butler, taking the lead of Mallory, Baker, and Townsend, established the "contraband decision," freeing slaves seeking refugee behind Union Lines. This sparked a massive refugee crisis across Union-held territories.
1862	Military Operation	The Union Army seizes Yorktown from Confederate forces on May 4.
1863	Built	The Reverends Jeremiah Asher and John Carey establish the first Shiloh Baptist Church.
	Military Operation	President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1.
	Inhabited	On July 1, one officer noted over 12,000 refugees in and around Fort Yorktown. <sup>144</sup>
	Established	Responding to the influx of refugees, General Wistar ordered the platting and construction of Slabtown. Between July 16-23, the refugees with the help of soldiers built Slabtown. <sup>145</sup>
1865	Military Operation	The Civil War ends on May 9.
	Land Transfer	In 1865, the land on which Slabtown was platted reverted to its Confederate owner, Dr. Frederick W. Power.
1867	Abandoned	The Union Army decommissioned Fort Yorktown. Other relief agencies left the area.

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<sup>143</sup> Yorktown CLI, 19.

<sup>144</sup> Isaac Jones Wistar, *Autobiography of Isaac Jones Wistar, 1827-1905: Half a Century of War and Peace* (Philadelphia: The Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, 1937), 417-418.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*



	Land Transfer	Dr. Frederick W. Power sold his land to Wolf and Heyman, immigrants from New York, who started a lumber business. <sup>146</sup>
1873	Land Transfer	Starting in 1873, Slabtown residents began purchasing the land from Wolf and Heyman, who had previously agreed to let them remain on their properties. <sup>147</sup>
1881-1884	Built/Memorialized	Yorktown monument is designed and constructed.
1897	Destroyed	The second Shiloh Baptist Church was destroyed by fire. <sup>148</sup>
	Built	The third Shiloh Baptist church was built.
1916	Established	The Organic Act established the National Park Service.
1920s	Restored	In the 1920s, private owners purchased and began restoration projects in Yorktown. <sup>149</sup>
	Built	The Yorktown Country Club established a heritage themed golf course on the battlefield. <sup>150</sup>
1921	Established	The Association for the Preservation of Antiquities (APVA) and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) established Yorktown chapters. <sup>151</sup>
1926	Established	John D. Rockefeller and W.A.R. Godwin established Colonial Williamsburg.

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<sup>146</sup> Depew, 27. See also, interview with Diane Depew; Interpretive Binders by Hampton University students in COLO Interpretive Division.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Daily Press*, April 20, 1897.

<sup>149</sup> Yorktown CLI, 19.

<sup>150</sup> Sarah M. Goldberger, "Repatriating Yorktown: The Politics of Revolutionary Memory and Reunion," Dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2010: 235-237.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

1930	Established	Legislation authorizing the establishment of Colonial National Monument is approved on July 3. <sup>152</sup>
1930-1942	Planned/Built	Colonial Parkway is planned and constructed between Yorktown and Williamsburg .
1931	Established	Charles E. Peterson lobbied for funding to write the first historic structure report on Yorktown's Nelson House. <sup>153</sup>
	Restored	The National Park Service intends to restore all of Yorktown to its 1781 appearance. <sup>154</sup>
	Memorialized	COLO hosts the Yorktown sesquicentennial.
1933	Established	The Historic American Buildings Survey is established.
	Excavated	Archeological investigations begin in Yorktown. <sup>155</sup>
	Land Transfer	Management of the Yorktown National Cemetery is transferred from the War Department to the National Park Service on August 10. <sup>156</sup>
1934-1935	Reconstructed/Restored	Yorktown reconstructions and restorations begin. <sup>157</sup>
1934	Memorialized/Built	A Confederate monument and cemetery are established on a historical location on the edge of Slabtown. <sup>158</sup>
	Memorialized/Built	Park officials remove the Shaw Monument after discovering the Surrender Field was elsewhere. <sup>159</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> 46 Stat. 855.

<sup>153</sup> Travis McDonald, "In Memory of Charles E. Peterson, 1906-2004," *APT Bulletin* 37, no. 1 (2006): 4.

<sup>154</sup> Yorktown CLI, 20.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> See Ethan Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 19-38.

<sup>157</sup> Yorktown CLI, 20.

<sup>158</sup> "Cemetery Site Location Picked," *Daily Press*, November 23, 1934.

<sup>159</sup> Goldberger, "Repatriating Yorktown," 235-237.



1936	Established	Colonial National Monument is re-designated as a Colonial National Park.
	Land Transfer	The earliest recorded Slabtown condemnation proceeding appears in the <i>Daily Press</i> . <sup>160</sup>
1940	Reconstructed/Restored	Lack of funds and support lead to realization that reconstruction of Yorktown at scale of Colonial Williamsburg is not possible. <sup>161</sup>
1950s-1970s	Land Transfer	Height of land acquisition efforts.
1955-1966	Established/Planned	Mission 66
1955-1956	Built	The Yorktown Visitor Center is built during the Mission 66 era.
1963	Memorialized	Shiloh Baptist Church celebrates its 100th anniversary.
1971	Demolished/Land Transfer	Shiloh Baptist Church agreed to a land swap and sale. The battlefield church property is demolished. <sup>162</sup>
1971-1973	Built	The current Shiloh Baptist Church is built.
1974	Planned	Congress approved funding to acquire the remaining properties in Slabtown.
1976	Memorialized	U.S. Bicentennial
1977	Land Transfer	The last resident leaves Slabtown. <sup>163</sup>
1980s-1990s	Established	Cultural landscapes emerge as a field of study with the National Park Service.

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<sup>160</sup> “U.S. Government Sues to Condemn Lot in Yorktown,” *Daily Press*, July 2, 1936. The article notes, “the land sought by the government is described as plat 14 on the plan of Slabtown.”

<sup>161</sup> Yorktown CLI, 20.

<sup>162</sup> History of Shiloh Baptist Church, Yorktown, Virginia, <http://www.virginiamemory.com/transcribe/items/show/10764>. The church broke ground on December 18, 1971, and the new structure was dedicated on December 23, 1973.

<sup>163</sup> Tom Whitford, “Cradle of Independence: Yorktown Families To Be Uprooted,” *Daily Press*, March 20, 1977; Deed 330, Floyd E. Hill Tract 03-157, COLO archives, Yorktown, VA. It is important to note that this date is based on the latest deed files found and the last newspaper clippings on the subject. It is possible that this date could be off by a few years. More research is necessary to solidify an absolute end date.

1980s	Established	COLO began researching and rediscovering the park's Civil War heritage. <sup>164</sup>
1981	Memorialized	Yorktown celebrates the 200th anniversary of the 1781 Siege of Yorktown.
1990s	Damaged	Looters damaged Civil War earthworks on the battlefield. A new sense of urgency prompts more Civil War research. <sup>165</sup>
2002-2005	Researched	The first research papers are written on Slabtown. <sup>166</sup>
2013	Memorialized	On July 20-21, COLO hosts a symposium on the African American experience at Yorktown. Slabtown and Shiloh Baptist Church celebrate the heritage of Slabtown with a homecoming parade and celebration. <sup>167</sup>

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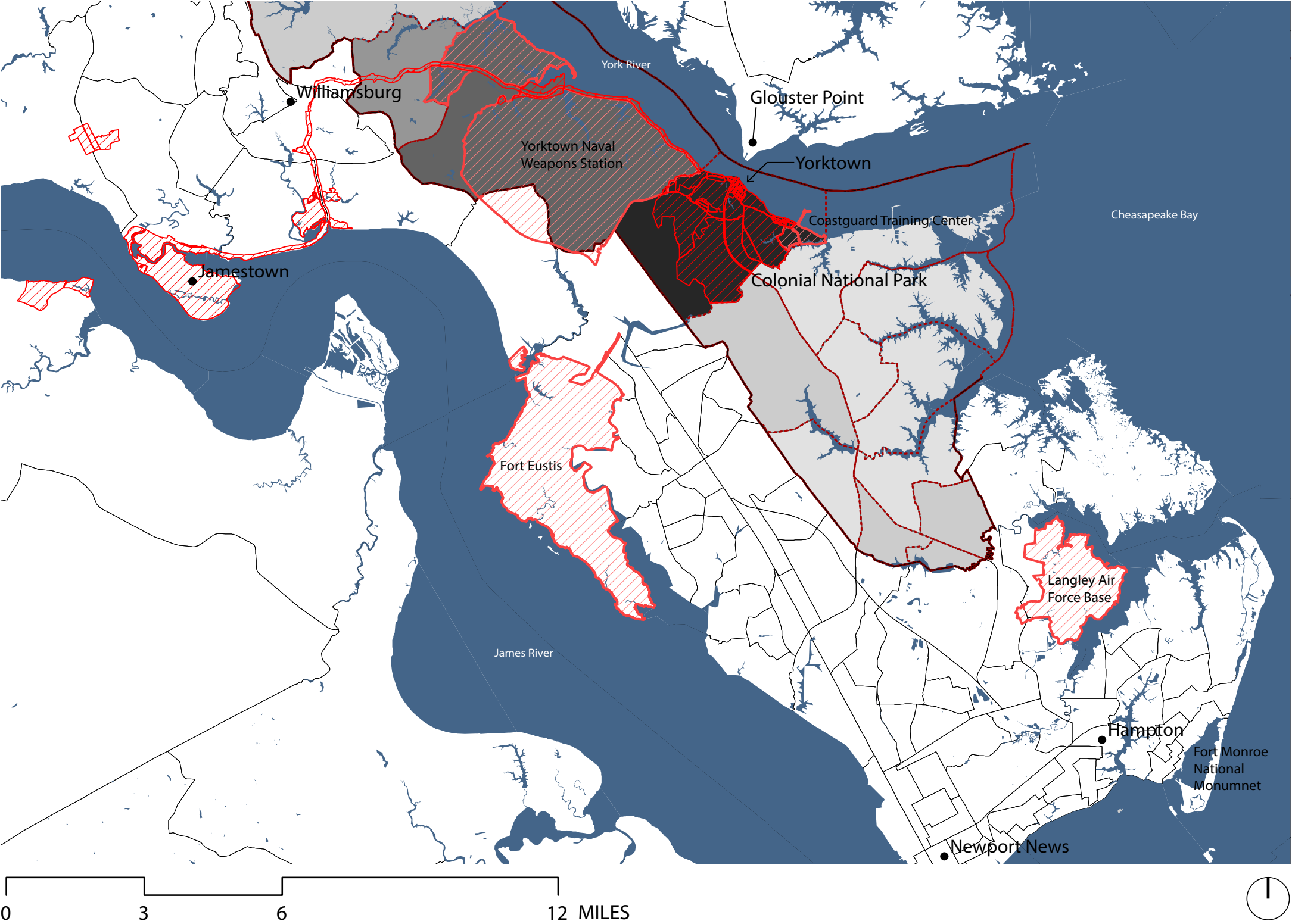
<sup>164</sup> See, Diane Depew, Interview, February 27, 2019, transcribed in Appendix C.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> See Deetz, 2002; Depew, 2005 (revised 2006).

<sup>167</sup> Diane Depew, "'I thought freedom was better than anything else' Contraband Robert Ruffin, Yorktown," National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 2013, <https://home.nps.gov/resources/2016.htm?id=50E48859-155D-451F-67CD6D378473DC20>.

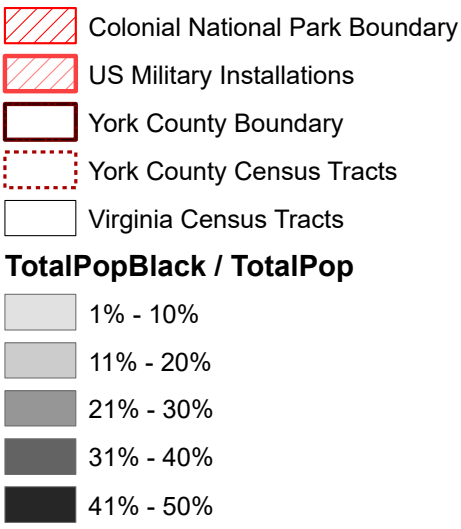
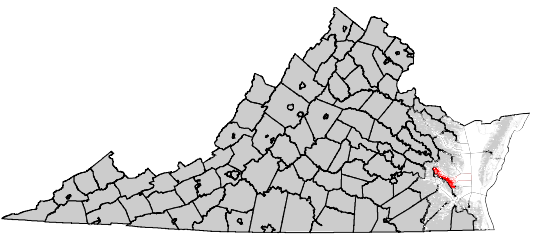
Appendix C: Maps



**RACE + DISPLACEMENT:  
COLONIAL NATIONAL  
HISTORICAL PARK**

University of Pennsylvania

**JAKE TORKELSON**



**SOURCES:** 2016 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY // VIRGINIA OPEN DATA PORTAL // U.S. CENSUS BUREAU TIGER SHAPEFILES // IRMA DATA PORTAL, COLONIAL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Map 1. Map of the Virginia Peninsula showing federal land ownership (red hatch) and the percent of black residents per census district in York County, 2016. (Torkelson, 2019)





Map 2. The greater Yorktown Battlefield area. White lines indicate ownership in 1933. Note the locations of the Braxton, Marshall, York Star Masonic Lodge, W.A.R. Godwin, and Shiloh properties. Slabtown (center) remains an unrestored part of the Yorktown Battlefield and is rapidly being lost to vegetation, as little has been done with the area since its acquisition in the late 1970s.  
(Map by Torkelson, 2019; data courtesy Colonial National Historical Park)



## **Appendix D: Oral History Transcripts**

### **Interview with Retired Supervisory Park Ranger Diane Depew Colonial National Historical Park**

Re: Slabtown Research, Interpretation, and Homecoming Celebration  
Phone Interview, February 27, 2019

*The following is the transcript of an interview conducted by Jacob Torkelson of the University of Pennsylvania, with retired Supervisory Park Ranger Diane Depew on February 27, 2019 as part of his master's thesis on Slabtown. As accurately as possible, the transcript has been reproduced from the audio recording of the interview. Some parts have been omitted at the request of both parties.*

#### **Jacob Torkelson 1:30**

Yes. Okay, so it looks like everything's working. Can you hear me?

#### **Diane Depew 1:36**

Oh yeah, I can hear you fine.

#### **Jacob Torkelson 1:37**

Okay, wonderful. I just had to try out this new app that actually records in my iPhone, which is really wonderful. The app sort of fades a little bit of that background noise out. If you can hear there's unfortunately a big HVAC machine in the same room I'm in.

#### **Diane Depew 1:58**

Yes.

#### **Jacob Torkelson 1:59**

I like to start out interviews by having the person introduce themselves, their background—and particularly in your case—I would like to talk about your progression in the Park Service, how you ended up at Colonial National Park, and maybe a little bit about your career. Then ultimately how you began working on Slabtown. So, I'll give you the mic and free rein now.

#### **Diane Depew 2:24**

Okay, so, I am Diane Depew. I am retired from the National Park Service. I started out in the National Park Service as a volunteer first at Harpers Ferry and then secured a permanent position on the Natchez Trace Parkway. From there I moved to Gettysburg National Military Park. After four years at Gettysburg, I took a lead park ranger position at Colonial National Historical Park, anticipating I would be there for a couple of years, but I kept getting promotions while I was there. I went from lead ranger to supervisory park ranger, overseeing daily operations at Yorktown. Then, in that position, I eventually

assumed the exact same duties at Jamestown. They doubled my job responsibility! When our division chief left, I got promoted into her position. Basically, I ended up being at Colonial almost... well, let me see... I started there in 1988 and I retired in January of 2015... so twenty-seven years.

When I began working at Colonial, Civil War history was sort of taboo. The emphasis at the park, and in some respects, rightfully so, was the 1781 siege of Yorktown that ended the American Revolutionary War. But in the-- I would say, mid 1990s, there was an ARPA case where men were illegally digging for Civil War artifacts in the park. As part of that legal process the park was, well-- called on the carpet is a little harsh... but the men didn't receive extreme punishment, let's say, because the judge said that the Park Service really didn't do much to care for the Civil War resources at Yorktown. So that's sort of what started me on the Civil War journey, so to speak, as a researcher and historian. Up until that time, basically the aspect of Yorktown's Civil War history that was acknowledged was its role in the Peninsula Campaign. But as I got deeper into the research, I discovered that Yorktown's Civil War history is much, much more than that. In fact, Yorktown was federally held territory after the Peninsula Campaign and was run as the headquarters for the district of Eastern Virginia. Yorktown was a federal fort called Fort Yorktown and it was garrisoned throughout the remainder of the war (although, during Petersburg-- we say they sort of had a base closure and moved most of the troops over to Petersburg).

**Jacob Torkelson 6:06**

Let me just interrupt for one minute. What year did you start at Colonial? I don't know if you said?

**Diane Depew 6:13**

I started at Colonial in 1988.

**Jacob Torkelson 6:17**

Okay, 1988 to January 2015. Okay, thank you for letting me clarify.

**Diane Depew 6:22**

So-- as things started evolving and I kept getting research grants to go to different depositories like the National Archives... We went to University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. We went to the New York Historical Society. I spent time at, what at that time was called the MHI or Military History Institute. I really started uncovering the depth of Yorktown's Civil War history. A big component of that, as it turned out, was the contraband story because again, it was federally held territory in southeastern Virginia. Fort Yorktown was deep in the Confederacy.

I don't know if you had had a chance yet to explore general Wistar since he is connected with Pennsylvania and the Wistar Institute. He claimed that when he took command in the summer of 1863, that there were thousands of contrabands, there just right at Yorktown, relying on the Federal Army for support. And so, his intent became to provide

them with some way of self-sufficiency. He believed the contraband would be less of a drain on military resources if they were self-sufficient.

And so, the contraband-- like I say, the contraband story really started emerging. And then again, this was 1990s. We sort of pole vault forward to 2012, 2013, when we're into the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. And, of course, people are looking at how do we commemorate this, remember this, etc.? And for Yorktown-- this Contraband story was something that we felt was very important to tell, especially because of the Slabtown community. And Slabtown was actually the community that was started by General Wistar, in the summer of 1863, to provide housing for the contrabands. As part of that, some faith-based organizations, as we now refer to them, came into Yorktown to provide education and job training for these contrabands. So again, their aim was to try to help make the contraband self-sufficient.

As that community evolved in 1863, you have a church forming in the community. It was formed by a local lay minister, as well as a military chaplain by the name of Jeremiah Asher, who was actually African American. He was born free, I believe in Connecticut, and eventually he ends up in Philadelphia and became a military chaplain. This is rather unique because military chaplains held officer ranks and normally African Americans were prohibited from being officers in the federal forces. His was a unique case. When he comes to Yorktown, he and the local lay minister form a church named, Shiloh Baptist Church. Jeremiah Asher's church in Philadelphia is also Shiloh Baptist Church and that church that was formed still exists and it still provides a sort of anchor for the African American community.

Unfortunately, Slabtown itself no longer exists because it had the misfortune of being built right in the heart of the 1781 battlefield. As part of the bicentennial of the country, all of the properties in Slabtown were purchased by the federal government. The community was, for the most part, relocated about a mile way, as well as the church. But again, the church itself still exists; it still provides that anchor for the community. So, as we are looking at the 150th for the Civil War, we're also looking at the 150th anniversary for Shiloh Baptist Church and all that that religious community represents in the spectrum of the Civil War history for Yorktown.

**Jacob Torkelson 12:07**

Wow. That is a very, very complete answer. And I really appreciate that. It is interesting you talk about Wistar. I have had a chance to read Wistar's writings in some capacity and also your paper that included a lot of Wistar's works. In doing so, I came across the fact that Wistar actually started three contraband communities (sort of quasi-simultaneously). There was Acretown, which I think became Lackey. There was Slabtown. And then there was one another contraband camp at Gloucester Point. Obviously, the focus of your work at Yorktown was to study Slabtown, but in telling that story, why aren't the other contraband camps mentioned?

**Diane Depew 13:06**



Because the other communities did not retain the cohesiveness that Shiloh Baptist Church still provides; they didn't have the continuum from the contraband community to the present day. In the case of Shiloh Baptist Church, you still have members there who lived in Slabtown and who are descended from people who lived in Slabtown. There are still have burials actually on the battlefield even today taking place from that community. With Gloucester Point's contraband community, absolutely nothing exists. Acretown, or Lackey, has been absorbed by the Naval Weapons Station and again does not retain any cohesiveness like the African community at Yorktown.

The other thing with Slabtown at Yorktown is that some of those people have been "after the National Park Service" to tell their story. Some of them were rather bitter about being forced to sell their properties because they felt that the land was theirs. Many felt the homes that were provided to them (the homes they were relocated to)... some felt that the home that they gave up on the battlefield was nicer.

Yeah, yes. And also, and again... I've been retired for four years now... but when I was in the Park Service, we had something called the long-range interpretive plan. As part of the planning process, we invited members of the community to come and participate. We did have some members of the African American community come to those meetings. Because of their input one of our goals became to tell more of the Slabtown story at Yorktown. The other thing is that the Park Service does not own anything in Lackey. Really, I have not seen any much in the way of information on the contraband community at Lackey, other than some of the faith-based organizations who were going there to teach.

**Jacob Torkelson 16:16**

Yeah, you know, I think it's really sort of fascinating. You're going through this process and really reaching out to the community. And I wonder... I've had the privilege of talking to one member of Slabtown, Ethel Curtis, and then also your counterpart at Shiloh Church, the historian Cassie Phillips. It has been a pleasure of speaking with both of them about how they experienced this this whole discovery process. It's interesting, you mentioned that there are individuals who actively wanted you to tell their story. And that there were some that were really still hostile towards the Park Service. I wonder if you could speak about the diversity of the atmospheres there: how different people felt and what it was at that time coming to the park?

**Diane Depew 17:05**

Well, for me, I personally never sensed any hostility. I do know that there was one individual—Sherman Hill, I believe, is his name—who was hostile toward the Park Service. He was not happy that he had given up his home and that the Park Service never recognized the contraband community and all their contributions to Civil War history. What was interesting with him was when we were done with the Shiloh homecoming, after the revealing of the waysides and the telling of the story of Shiloh Baptist Church and of Slabtown, he felt much better. He felt like there had been some healing, of those bad feelings, because the Park Service was finally acknowledging their history there at

Yorktown. In terms of the folks at Shiloh Baptist Church, that was just a very positive working relationship. And we could not have done what we did in the summer of 2013 without them. And again, that church is integral to telling the story.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:38**

It's interesting, you say that Mr. Hill was hostile in some ways and then relieved. I reached out to him to interview for my thesis here, and unfortunately, he didn't get back to me. I had mentioned this to some of the other people I interviewed, and they had said, there's sort of a conflict with who owns the story of Slabtown and who gets to tell that story. I wonder if you can speak to that a little bit?

**Diane Depew 19:10**

Well, again, I wasn't privy to the... to that conflict. I'm not aware of any of the specifics of it. Like I said, everybody that I worked with—and I did not work with Sherman, so I can't speak to what his concerns are—but he did it, he did attend the homecoming and, and he was quite happy. So that was my perspective.

**Jacob Torkelson 19:42**

I've been focusing a little more on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century story of Slabtown because I think your work has been so thorough on the earlier years of Slabtown. It would seem, there is a multiplicity of experiences as to the demise of Slabtown—that there really is not just one story. It would seem that Shiloh is telling one story, and then there's sort of these other individual stories. So that's, that's kind of a piece I'm beginning to grasp—

**Diane Depew 20:21**

That makes that makes sense, because not everybody would be part of Shiloh. Not everybody who was part of Slabtown was part of Shiloh.

**Jacob Torkelson 20:31**

Were there other churches?

**Diane Depew 20:34**

There was another church, I believe. It shows up on one of the maps of Slabtown. There was talk amongst some churches—I don't think it was followed through on—of forming an organization of what's called the “contraband churches” in the peninsula area. That is, the churches that were formed by different contraband communities. But nothing came of that as far as I know.

**Jacob Torkelson 21:22**

Did you find that when you were working with Shiloh that they knew their own history, or was it more of a discovery process?

**Diane Depew 21:30**

No, they knew their own history. I'm sure that we filled in some things for them. I know they didn't know much about Jeremiah Asher. They're the ones that provided the

information on the local lay minister who participated, and you actually do see this in some records of the church. His name is John Cary. It's not until you really get into Civil War history and really start looking at Jeremiah Asher and Jeremiah Asher's military records that the pieces of it come together. To me one of the interesting things about Slabtown's history is how—and I didn't cover this in my paper because my paper is really just on the Civil War—the folks from Slabtown acquired their property. The Hampton University students, in their primary research, uncovered how all of that evolved because those properties were to revert to the Confederate land owners when the war was over. Obviously, that did not happen. I think that's also rather unique in keeping that community together.

**Jacob Torkelson 23:21**

Tell me what you remember about that.

**Diane Depew 23:24**

In terms of how they acquired the property?

**Jacob Torkelson 23:26**

Yes.

**Diane Depew 23:28**

Well the southern owner sold it to... interestingly enough, they were brothers-in-law. The one man had married the other man's sister. They were both immigrants and they acquired the property as part of a logging enterprise. They allowed the community to continue to exist, and I believe, when they both died, the sister/wife started allowing the property owners—well, the folks living on the property—to begin purchasing their properties. So that's how the contraband community stayed.

**Jacob Torkelson 24:27**

I had never been able to see the primary documentation on that. But that's what I had surmised from looking at deeds and other documents. Around 1870ish, a lot of these long-term owners started to purchase their properties.

**Diane Depew 24:48**

Right.

**Jacob Torkelson 24:48**

It's interesting. I've been reading a lot of letters from around the time of the land acquisition program (1930s-1960s). There was one superintendent, at the time, that said something along the lines of, "we must acquire this land because in some cases, ownership dates back to the 1870s and the heirs are multiplying." He compared the residents of Slabtown to Rabbits, which was really an unfortunate description.

How was the story of Slabtown received when you were advocating for that interpretation? How was that received at the park?

**Diane Depew 26:47**

Well, when I was there, it was very, very well received at that particular time. Like I say, when I first started at the park is in 1988, you didn't talk about the Civil War. But I had a lot of support from my boss, and from the park superintendent, in putting together the 150th. And in working with Shiloh Baptist Church. I hate to put it this way, but including Slabtown gave a lot of positive PR [public relations] to the park.

**Jacob Torkelson 27:33**

It would seem that—Sorry, go. Please. please.

**Diane Depew 27:37**

But also, everything evolves. I think the Park Service and many other historical institutions are trying to tell more inclusive stories and they recognize that the history of the United States isn't just about political leaders and celebrities. It's not just about the people that have been in the history books; it's the story of all of us. And for years—well, decades—the African American story has been ignored. And it's an important part of our history. You're also sort of riding on that wave, so to speak. Again, I had a Park superintendent, at the time, who right now is acting Park Service Director, actually.

**Jacob Torkelson 28:46**

Oh, really?

**Diane Depew 28:48**

Yeah. Yeah. He was very supportive, very, very supportive. There were some logistical details of the Slabtown homecoming that without his support, and the support of law enforcement and support of the local community, which would have been much more challenging because part of that homecoming involved the congregation walking from their current church to the location where the church had been prior to that, near the National Cemetery. And one doesn't just shut down a major highway!

**Jacob Torkelson 29:40**

I'll say! I tried to walk that route myself when I was in Yorktown a couple of weeks ago. It was like I was taking my life into my own hands.

**Diane Depew 29:46**

Yes, well, we shut down a major highway, let's just say that.

**Jacob Torkelson 29:53**

Tell me tell me a little bit more about the homecoming process. What kind of feelings came up? What was it like?

**Diane Depew 30:03**

I must say, from a personal perspective, that I found the congregation of Shiloh to be so welcoming. It made me want to join their church. I really felt like these people were

walking the talk, as they say. It was a wonderful way to finish off my career because I was in my last years before retirement. It was just such a total positive, beautiful experience working with them. I enjoyed getting to know them. The fact that they provided their church for the symposium... I mean, before that I thought, "where am I going to hold this symposium?" It was just the perfect location, and they were happy. We were happy. Everybody was happy, so to speak.

**Jacob Torkelson 31:21**

Tell me a little bit more about who all was involved. I understand you were, and I understand, Shiloh was. What other what other groups were involved? What other people? Tell me about that.

**Diane Depew 31:33**

You would have to look at the documentation on that because my memory is not very good on names. We did have the gentleman that wrote the book on the Peninsula Campaign. *The Peninsula Campaign & the Necessity of Emancipation*, that's the approximate title. It was totally, totally fascinating. I thought that everybody was fascinating. There was another professor who had written a book on the educators of the contrabands from a historical perspective. There was also Emanuel Dabney. He was quite interesting. He is a historian, curator with the National Park Service at Petersburg. He researched how Slabtown and the Freedmen's Bureau interfaced. As I said, his was quite fascinating, because what he discovered was that Slabtown didn't follow the norm. The people of Slabtown didn't really need much in the way of assistance from the federal government; they were a fairly self-sufficient community that thrived without much in the way of government intervention on assistance. There was also, of course, the Hampton University students. They did their own presentations.

**Jacob Torkelson 33:14**

Wow, it really does sound like such a rewarding experience to have been a part of. I think that's brilliant.

**Diane Depew 33:22**

Oh, yes, it was. And I guess sort of jumping back... again, when I first started at the park, we didn't talk about the Civil War. The park was named "colonial." National park sites are supposed to focus on what's called their enabling legislation, which is the legislation or whatever legal document established each site. It's the document that explains why each park exists. What's interesting for Colonial is that its enabling legislation actually says that the park must preserve and interpret all historic resources within its boundaries. It does not set a specific timeframe or event. Even if you get into the congressional deliberations for the establishment of the park, things keep coming up in the deliberations including interpreting the 1781 siege, the establishment of Jamestown in 1607, and the Civil War. Congress, at least through looking at their deliberations, is telling us what their thought process was at that time. So, to have just ignored the Civil War up to that point, I think did a bit of a disservice, in a way not only to the African American history, but to the cultural resources as well.

And in the park, under the Park Service, there has been some destruction of actual Civil War fortifications.

**Jacob Torkelson 35:34**

I want to I want to revisit that point. But I want to ask you first about Slabtown. At this moment in time, when you started telling the Civil War story, did that coincide with telling the contraband and Slabtown story, or was one before the other?

**Diane Depew 35:54**

No. One was before the other. Again, it was some crime in the mid 1990s that we had the ARPA case, which is when we started looking at the cultural resources, but also for the Civil War history. A year before I got there, there was a man by the name of Dr. Adrian Wheat who came to the park and said, "I want to do just one day event in the Nelson house on the Civil War." The Nelson house was a hospital for most of the Civil War. The park let him do that. And when I got there, the following year, it continued again. Then again for the Yorktown 300th, which would have been 1991. For the 300th anniversary of Yorktown, part of that commemorative event involved having reenactment groups for all the centuries of Yorktown's history. We had 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries there. So that's when we started really evolving, having at least a Civil War event each year at Yorktown over Memorial Day weekend. Then Dr. Wheat—he was a military doctor—did a program at the visitor center on Yorktown and the Peninsula Campaign. As a result of some of the questioning from the audience asking why the park didn't do more with the Civil War.... and the park Superintendent, Alec Gould, was actually in the audience at the time. Dr. Wheat said, "Well, we would need more support from the Park Service in order to do more." And Alec Gould stood up and said, "You have it."

That moment literally became when we had support from top management to start doing more with the Civil War. This is coinciding, then about the same time, with the ARPA case. So, I started getting into the research and everybody just sort of presumed that I was a Civil War historian, because prior to coming to Yorktown, I worked at Gettysburg for four years. I was always like, "it's not that I am just a Civil War historian. It's that this has never been truly explored." There was so much research to do. In contrast, the visitor center had an entire library full of resources on the 1781 siege. When I got there, we had maybe a dozen books on the Civil War in the library.

**Jacob Torkelson 39:27**

Really?

**Diane Depew 39:29**

Yes, yes! When I had the opportunity and money in hand to spend, I added to the library. I certainly built up that aspect of the library with first-hand accounts and such. Doc Wheat and I then for three years, we started doing bus tours—Civil War bus tours. We were actually taking groups into the woods, which in and of itself can be rather interesting.



**Jacob Torkelson 40:07**

In the woods by Slabtown, you mean?

**Diane Depew 40:08**

We took them into the woods by Slabtown... we, we took them all over. We went to all of the different Civil War fortifications that are in park. Yorktown has more Civil War fortifications than most of the Civil War parks.

As I mentioned earlier, the research evolved as I was getting into it. The focus in those early years was the Peninsula Campaign. In fact, Dr. Wheat did a book based on the Civil War photographs that were done of Yorktown. There are some really prominent ones that continued to appear in publications and such after the Civil War. These were photographs that were done in 1862. As my research evolved, I was thinking, "Wow! This is a story that didn't just stop when the Peninsula Campaign ended. This is a story that continued on in terms of Civil War History."

**Jacob Torkelson 40:10**

On these tours, did you tell the story of Slabtown? Or was that still emerging?

**Diane Depew 40:18**

I'm sorry, what was the question?

**Jacob Torkelson 41:36**

When you were giving the Civil War bus tours back in the woods, were you still learning the history of Slabtown? Or did you tell that on your tours?

**Diane Depew 41:46**

Oh no! We didn't tell it on the tour, because that was still in the early days when we were just focused on 1862. I think that was before I started getting research grants from Eastern National, the cooperating association, in which I could travel to other depositories, because this was before you have internet access to a lot of material.

**Jacob Torkelson 42:20**

Let me make sure I have the chronology right. I think we're jumping around a little bit. The ARPA case was in the 1950s?

**Diane Depew 42:33**

No, no, 1990s.

**Jacob Torkelson 42:35**

Ok, the 1990s. ARPA was the 1990s and then the Yorktown 200th was 1991. And so just prior to that was the Nelson house Civil War hospital project?

**Diane Depew 42:47**

Correct.

**Jacob Torkelson 42:47**

With the 300th anniversary of Yorktown really kicking off that Civil War research and the bus tours, when would you say Slabtown came into focus? What year?

**Diane Depew 43:01**

I would—I would probably say, around 2000.

**Jacob Torkelson 43:07**

Okay, so really coming to the fore around 2000?

**Diane Depew 43:10**

Yeah, because I think the paper that you have the from me... I think I actually started... there was an African American symposium over at Petersburg that I initially did a paper for, and I want to say that that was 2001?

**Jacob Torkelson 43:37**

I'm looking at your "They had bidden a farewell" paper and it says 2005, 2006. Does that seem accurate?

**Diane Depew 43:45**

Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 43:46**

Okay. Then the homecoming celebration at the 150th anniversary was in 2012 and 2013. So that's sort of, I think, where we are now. I wanted to ask you about that moment, because then a few years later, 2015, you retire. How do you feel about the current state of interpretation? Do you do you think it's enough? Are you satisfied? What do you think about all of it?

**Diane Depew 44:19**

I'm very sad about things. Gosh, how do I say, say things and be nice? Well, I think you have a number of things, you know, the Park Service is not filling positions. Number one. I think you have probably... a staff that is just struggling to keep buildings open. I could even see last Yorktown day that very, very little proactively happening. To be fair, however, I think I had the benefit and perhaps all that history had the benefit of the fact that I was at Yorktown for almost 27 years. What I learned isn't something anybody learns going there for a couple of years. What I learned evolved and grew and grew and grew. They barely do anything with the Civil War anymore. I don't think the National Cemetery exhibit is there any more. I don't even know if you got to see the exhibit that we did on Slabtown?

**Jacob Torkelson 46:20**

I did see it. It took me three whole visits—three, six-and-a-half-hour drives down there to finally get into the National Cemetery building. I only got 15 minutes to look at it, then they had to lock it back up. They opened specifically for me. It was closed to the public.

**Diane Depew 47:02**

Well, actually, we didn't staff it that much as well. We had a wonderful volunteer support when I was there. And we occasionally used our staff in the summer because, and again, it does get down to staffing. The Park Service is not filling permanent positions. I don't know what they have, in terms of seasonal staff... but I know at least four days a week, we had that building open with volunteers. But again, a lot of people were focused on the 150<sup>th</sup>, which has been forgotten.

Those exhibits were actually built to be easily moved. So, if another organization such the York County Historical Society, wanted to use, say, the Slabtown exhibit, they could request it and it could be moved. There are exhibit notebooks that explain how to literally take the exhibits apart and move them. So, I guess, in a sense, if Shiloh asked., if they wanted to display the exhibit for a while they could.

**Jacob Torkelson 49:48**

Say we live in a fairytale world for a moment. What would your ideal interpretation of Slabtown be? How would you like to see this story told?

**Diane Depew 50:06**

Well, I think I think it should be done in a couple of ways. One way, very simply, would be to have the cemetery lodge and the exhibits open on a on a regular basis. The other way is... it would be nice to see a publication on it. Someone did a book on the Freedmen's colony that was on Roanoke Island. Have you read that one?

**Diane Depew 50:47-51:16**

Hello?

**\*\*The call drops here. A new recording begins\*\***

**Jacob Torkelson 0:20**

Sorry, I lost you. I believe you had just said the easiest thing would be to reopen the cemetery building.

**Diane Depew 0:28**

Yes. Well, that, but also have you read the book on the Freedmen's colony that was at Roanoke?

**Jacob Torkelson 0:38**

I have not. Would you have a title?

**Diane Depew 0:42**

I would highly recommend that. It was an absolutely wonderful book. And I think something similar to that on Slabtown would be just awesome. It is a fascinating story.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:19**

Well, I certainly think so. I'm writing my master's thesis on it.

I think the first thing to be done would be simply to add a plaque or put some indication of where the traces of Slabtown are. The roads, the empty lots, the tree lines, the gardens...

To me, that seems like a logical second step. Maybe first step is to open the lodge. Second step is to figure out a way to bring people into the woods to see the traces of Slabtown.

**Diane Depew 1:51**

Right.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:54**

I keep coming back to this idea of a period of significance. I wonder what you think about the public's ability to grasp this layering of place—the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and Slabtown—all at once. What do you think about that? Can they handle it?

**Diane Depew 2:46**

Oh, I think so. Yes, although, backing up, you have to consider how you do that. I will say that when we would do the Civil War weekend, some people were confused because they were coming to Yorktown expecting 1781.

That was also one of the reasons that we tried to focus the Civil War interpretation—[geographically] separate from the interpretation of 1781. That's why Civil War material is over at the National Cemetery.

I'm presuming it's still up... we did an exhibit panel on Yorktown and the Civil War in the visitor center.

Yes, visitors can get all that. I think one of the challenges at Yorktown is that the Civil War history for Yorktown is relatively unknown by the general public. The flip of that is you do get Civil War enthusiasts who come there and are looking for traces of the Civil War. I just finished working for Colonial Williamsburg, they sort of have the same thing. What was interesting there... at Christmas time, one of their special programs that they did is called "An Un-Civil Christmas." It always sold out.

**Diane Depew 4:34**

Carson Hudson would be the person to talk to if you're interested in looking at colonial history and Civil War history in the same spot.

**Jacob Torkelson 4:59**

Who is this individual?

**Diane Depew 5:02**

Carson has written a book on Civil War Williamsburg. He does a lot of living history, but he also is a retired historian for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Like me, he has spent his life in two time periods.

**Jacob Torkelson 5:33**

Wow, that's great.

**Diane Depew 5:40**

Oh! Here is the name of the book. It's *A Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedman's Colony*.

**Jacob Torkelson 5:59**

Great. I will definitely check that out.

**Diane Depew 5:59**

Yeah, you definitely should take a look at that.

**Jacob Torkelson 6:05**

Who's the author?

**Diane Depew 6:08**

Patricia Click. C L I C K.

**Jacob Torkelson 6:14**

Great. I did want to revisit... we hit we had put a pin in that earlier. You were talking about reconstructions of earthworks and the veracity and the truth of it all. From what I understand, all the reconstructions had been done before your time, is that correct?

**Diane Depew 6:40**

Correct.

**Jacob Torkelson 6:41**

Okay. And so, what was your understanding when you got there of that process? Was that a pretty accurate reconstruction?

**Diane Depew 7:02**

In terms of the 1781 earthworks? Yes. In terms of location and in terms of the size? Probably not. There is one area of the second siege line that is slightly off because they started getting into burials. That's something that's not known a whole lot. They basically didn't want to get into a situation where they were dealing with unearthing people, so they moved the line a little bit. That would have been over in the Slabtown area.

**Jacob Torkelson 7:55**

Do we know who these people were, that were buried?

**Diane Depew 7:59**

No. I believe they were 19<sup>th</sup>-century burials. They just presumed that they went with Slabtown.

**Jacob Torkelson 8:10**

Interesting.

**Diane Depew 8:12**

Well, I would imagine that in the Masonic cemetery, there are probably some burials that don't have stones.

**Jacob Torkelson 8:22**

Yeah, I would certainly agree. It's sort of interesting that in the Masonic cemetery, the graves follow the road to Slabtown. They're sort of semi-platted but not quite.

**Diane Depew 8:37**

Right, right. In my time at the park, occasionally there would be a burial there. You could look out and you would see there was a funeral taking place.

You do know that for a while, Slabtown was also known as Uniontown?

**Jacob Torkelson 8:56**

Yes. I asked Ethel Curtis about the names. I wonder, what did you find to be the origin of the nomenclature of Slabtown versus Uniontown?

**Diane Depew 9:10**

The only thing I knew regarding Uniontown, when I first got to the park, was that the road going back into Slabtown had a road sign on it—one of those long green ones—that said Uniontown. That's the only place that I ever saw Uniontown in an official location. Every everywhere else says Slabtown.

**Jacob Torkelson 9:43**

I asked Ethel about this and she said that growing up everyone called it Uniontown. She never heard it called Slabtown until the Homecoming celebration. She hadn't really been aware that it was called Slabtown until this research came to light. I asked her, "what do you think about all that? Why do you think it was that wat?" She really didn't know. It would seem that this fact has been lost to history. A professor of mine had off-the-cuff thought said that it could have been a diminutive name applied by the government. However, that wouldn't seem to be the case. There's no evidence of that.

**Diane Depew 10:40**



I think the idea... When you say Slabtown, it sounds poor, it sounds... you know, like a mishmash of huts. But it got the name Slabtown because of the type of wood that was used to build those first cabins, which are... when we were doing the exhibit, I had to explain this over-and-over to the exhibit folks. I'm from Central PA. I grew up on a dairy farm, but my dad had a sawmill. I had to explain to people what wood slabs are. Which, if you go to any sawmill, you'll see the slab pile. So, when you read accounts from 1863, 1864, they talk about these cabins being neat and well-cared for. They were uniform. Basically, you're building a cabin with the outer part of the log. You get slabs when you take the tree and want to square it up. You run it through the sawmill and what comes off are the slabs. That's how Slabtown got its name. But secondly, they were not shanties. Let's put it that way.

**Jacob Torkelson 12:33**

Yeah. It's interesting you say that because that was sort of a myth I've been pushing against. These houses were the embodiment of the African American dream of land ownership and of freedom.

**Diane Depew 12:51**

Right. Right.

**Jacob Torkelson 12:52**

When we look at it retrospectively, when we're reading this and we're reading that. "Oh, they had dirt floors," or "they had slab walls." There is a connotation with that. Yet, if we look at how Slabtown developed... and currently I have been focusing on the 1960s and 1970s, if we look at the last few houses that were in Slabtown. If we look at photographs of these houses even in the written record, the superintendents talk about these being really terrible dwellings. Just, you know, slipshod. Then you look at the photos and you read the market appraisals and it doesn't add up. Many properties had been recently improved. New roofs, new bathroom renovations. They were really decent dwellings. And of course, that's not always the case. But it's important to push back against a lot of those stereotypes... I think it's really important.

**Jacob Torkelson 13:50**

Well, I think that just about all of my questions. I do, however, want to get a few spellings from you.

**Diane Depew 13:59**

Okay, I did want to suggest if you have not looked at it that you look in the Southern Claims.

**Jacob Torkelson 14:09**

Ruffin, right?

**Diane Depew 14:11**

Yeah, Robert Ruffin.

**Jacob Torkelson 14:12**

Right.

**Diane Depew 14:12**

Yeah. Have you read his account?

**Jacob Torkelson 14:14**

I have and it's wonderful and wonderfully sad, as well. I'd love to hear your take on it.

**Diane Depew 14:25**

Well, to me, it sort of rips at your heart in a way. When he said... when the commission asked, "your master took good care of you and you basically have no complaints, so why did you leave him?" And then he responds, "because freedom was better than anything else." If you look at his life, he goes on, he goes to college for a while, and actually does fairly well in life.

**Jacob Torkelson 15:01**

Yeah, I remember reading that he went on to be a, I think a state assemblyman. Then there were what seems like really small fabricated charges, that were conjured up, saying that he was corrupt. He was basically forced out of the job. Sure, we can't necessarily verify the veracity of those claims today, but it really makes you wonder if it was it because he was black? Was that the reason that he faced such adversity? Almost certainly so.

**Diane Depew 16:02**

And for him, it's like, "oh, we're sorry, we can't reimburse you because you're-- the stuff from your store was not officially appropriated."

**Jacob Torkelson 16:14**

Right. I mean, ugh. The thing that got me was when the commanding officer at Fort Yorktown, who it seemed Ruffin knew fairly well, came out and said, "Ruffin, just get out of here with your life and we can sort it all out later." Talk about ripping at your heart, as you say.

You mentioned the Emmanuel Dabney; how do you spell Dabney?

**Diane Depew 16:53**

D A B N E Y. And yeah, if you ever need to talk to somebody on African American History in the Civil War he is the person you want to talk to.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:06**

He is the one, huh. Ok. And then another name was Dr. Adrian Wheat. Is that W H E A T?

**Diane Depew 17:14**

Yes. And sadly, he has passed away.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:19**

And then I think there was Carson Hudson. Is that Hudson as an H U D S O N?

**Diane Depew 17:36**

Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:37**

Okay. Carson with a C, I assume?

**Diane Depew 17:41**

Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:42**

I don't think I've ever seen it with the a "K."

**Diane Depew 17:46**

You never know!

**Jacob Torkelson 17:47**

You never know, do you?

Well, this has really given me a lot to think about. As I continue my work, I'll be sure to reach out with questions. Eventually I will transcribe this and send you a copy to approve. I'll also send a release with it. And with your approval, I'd like to deposit our interview into Colonial's archives.

**Diane Depew 18:30**

Great.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:30**

There is one question I did want to ask before we go. Is there anyone that you know that's still alive today from the land acquisition era that I could speak to?

**Diane Depew 18:59**

James Haskett, who was Chief of Interpretation during the bicentennial, he's still alive and very much of sound mind. Another person who knows a lot I think about the land records, and such is Jane Sundberg. Now, she didn't start working there until I want to say 1982.

**Jacob Torkelson 19:56**

And how do you spell Haskett?

**Diane Depew 19:59**

H A S K E T T? He and his wife still live in the Yorktown area.

**Jacob Torkelson 20:32**

Why don't you email me his contact information and sort of as the research progresses I'd love to talk to him. And if not this time around with the master's thesis, I would love to speak with him at a later date. My advisor is encouraging me at the moment to put a pin in doing more interviews and start writing!

**Diane Depew 20:57**

Yes, I understand that. I remember that from when I did my master's. You know, it was like, you have to stop researching at some point and write with what you have. Yes!

**Jacob Torkelson 21:08**

Ugh, I know I just want to be a squirrel and gather, gather, gather, gather. And he has told me to really, really get going.

**Jacob Torkelson 21:20**

It sure was a pleasure talking with you. I hope you have a good rest of your day.

**Diane Depew 21:36**

I'm excited that someone else is interested in the story of Slabtown.

**Jacob Torkelson 21:55**

There's a lot of a lot of interest in Slabtown right now. Yeah, a lot of interest.

**Diane Depew 22:01**

Good!

**Jacob Torkelson 22:01**

All right, Diane, we'll talk to you later.

**Diane Depew 22:04**

All right. Thank you.

**Jacob Torkelson 22:06**

Thank you.

**Diane Depew 22:06**

All right. Bye bye.

**Interview with Ethel Curtis and Cassie Phillips  
Colonial National Historical Park**

Re: Slabtown/Uniontown and Shiloh Baptist Church Homecoming Celebration

Interviewed at Shiloh Baptist Church, Yorktown, VA

February 14, 2019

*The following is the transcript of an interview conducted by Jacob Torkelson, of the University of Pennsylvania, with former Slabtown resident, Ethel Curtis, and Shiloh Baptist Church Historian, Cassie Phillips, on February 27, 2019 as part of his master's thesis on Slabtown. As accurately as possible, the transcript has been reproduced from the audio recording of the interview. Some parts have been omitted at the request of both parties.*

**Jacob Torkelson 1:09**

I like to start interviews by having the interviewees introduce themselves in their own words. If you want, go ahead and talk about your position, how you fit into the story of Slabtown, your name—that kind of stuff. Whatever comes to mind.

**Ethel Curtis 1:29**

Well, I'm Ethel Curtis and I was not born in Slabtown, but raised in Slabtown. I have pictures of my home. They were part of a different interview... that we were given some time ago. They took pictures of my home and myself in front. I think it was quite a few families out there. I don't remember the number of families that were... that had to move. My mom and dad were... well, my dad had passed away when my mother moved. Yes, my dad passed away about a year before. It was quite an interesting time, because my mom found out that... well, my dad was living then. When she had to move, it was very upsetting because they'd been there all their lives, in that area. But, after the move she was quite content where she was. The homes that were built for them... they were very nice on the outside, but the insides were just not that great. The materials just didn't last... but the outsides looked good. My mom was very happy up there because all of her friends were there with her too. They all moved to the same place. I can't give you a lot of history on Slabtown—only what I have read. I know that we were a close-knit family over there that looked after each other. Happy time in my life. Very happy time in my life. But, I can't go back in history about how it was started and all that, only what's in the books.

**Jacob Torkelson 3:36**

I don't expect you to recount the history to me. I want to hear more about your lived experience because I think that's just as important as the early history of Slabtown.

**Ethel Curtis 3:47**

My father's family lived in Slabtown. And just about everybody over there was related in one way or the other.

**Jacob Torkelson 3:57**

And that name was Braxton?

**Ethel Curtis 3:59**

Yes, Braxton. Annias. Annias Braxton. That was my grandfather and Rhoda was my grandmother. And I could just go back to happy childhood. Oh...It was just a lovely place to be because we were so close-knit, and the other families lived just so close together. If one needed something everybody tried to help out. So that's about as far as I could go... And I lived there... we lived there until mom had to move. Well, I had gotten married, so I was out of the area. But, I think my mom was very happy where she was because she was near me...

**Jacob Torkelson 4:57**

When she moved or before?

**Ethel Curtis 4:58**

When she moved. Well she thought of that as home. When she married my dad, that's where they settled—in Slabtown. And when she moved, which is not too far from here, a place called Hickory Hill, they were all up there together. They formed that same bond because everybody knew everybody up there.

**Jacob Torkelson 5:24**

I think that's a great introduction.

**Ethel Curtis 5:26**

So that's what I have to offer.

**Jacob Torkelson 5:30**

Cassie, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Cassie Philips 5:34**

Yes. I am Cassie Lartigue Phillips. I am a member of Shiloh Baptist Church and I've been here for 10 years. I've been a member here. I relocated from New York into this area and

searched for churches in the area and ended up at Shiloh. I think it was a divine intervention, because this church has so much history. The moment I got here, Pastor Lemon assigned me into the historic ministry... and here I am a transplant from someplace else. But I guess she saw something [in me]. and I immersed myself into finding out more about Shiloh and Slabtown. Working with Diane Depew was a revelation that is an experience that everyone should go through when it comes to discovering history.

**Ethel Curtis 6:59**

No, you can call me mother. I love it.

**Cassie Philips 7:01**

Mother! Because she is probably the second oldest senior in our church. Everybody lovingly calls her Mother Curtis. She is on our deaconate ministry, along with I think ten other— eleven other people. It has been wonderful going through and learning and doing and seeing what this area is all about. As mother stated, it's close knit... it is still close knit. Back then it was and today it still is. Mother's parents were members of Shiloh over in Slabtown. She's from a long line of Slabtown residents, so to speak.

**Ethel Curtis 8:09**

I think I'm the oldest survivor from Slabtown. I believe I am... from Slabtown at least.

**Cassie Philips 8:16**

Right, from Slabtown. She's the oldest!

**Ethel Curtis 8:32**

I know I'm the oldest surviving Braxton.

**Jacob Torkelson 8:46**

That is quite the title.

Ethel, having specifically lived in Slabtown... how did you understand the boundaries of Slabtown growing up? What defined Slabtown? What were the boundaries?

**Ethel Curtis 9:16**

Slabtown was, as I stated... it was just a place where we all loved each other, you know, and we never had a lot, but we were content. My dad made his living, first he went to work at the CCC camp. Did you read about that? Well, he worked there to feed us. And then he... after the CCC camp. He went to work at the Weapons Station, which was the



Deep Naval Mine Depot then. It was just a great place to be. We knew of no other place. We played there. We walked to school. Our school was on Goosley Road then.<sup>168</sup>

**Jacob Torkelson 9:16**

What was the name of the school?

**Ethel Curtis 10:11**

York County Training School. They said it was an 11-year school, but we had something called primer, which was like preschool. So actually, you went 12 years, but when you graduated, we called it 11th grade. Yes, so that's all I could say. It was just a great place to be...

**Cassie Philips 10:29**

I think the Surrender Road and the... well, based on what I've heard... like I've said, I'm a transplant... Surrender Road was on the south side of Cook Road and Slabtown was on the north side. I could be wrong with the north and the south but, this side and that side. I think that was the dividing factor. It was simply the road that separated the two communities, yet the communities did associate with one another, but it was like two different communities.

**Jacob Torkelson 11:22**

What do you make of the terms Slabtown and Uniontown?

**Ethel Curtis 11:25**

I've often wondered when we made the transition from Slabtown to Uniontown. I really need that... because I came up knowing just Uniontown. But then after I got older, I heard about Slabtown. I don't know when we transitioned from Slabtown to Uniontown because that's all I knew until I got older. Then I heard more about Slabtown. The way they explained it to me was most of the houses out there were made of slabs.

**Cassie Philips 12:02**

Yes, slab boards.

**Jacob Torkelson 12:04**

That is what I've come across as well—

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<sup>168</sup> Ethel Curtis attended the York County Training School, located just down Goosley Road from the National Cemetery. Notably, York County Training School was built as a Rosenwald School, one of more than five thousand structures that were built with the express purpose of educating southern African-American children from 1917-1948. Julius Rosenwald, part-owner and president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company and Booker T. Washington ran the initiative.

**Ethel Curtis 12:19**

We were calling it Uniontown until I got older. Then I heard the term Slabtown and the explanation was because a lot of houses out there were made of slabs. But by the time I grew up, I didn't see any houses made of slabs.

**Cassie Philips 12:50**

Surrender Road... was that considered part of Uniontown?

**Ethel Curtis 12:58**

No, I don't think so. It was called Surrender Road. There were a lot of houses there. When I say a lot, there were maybe about six, seven...

**Cassie Philips 13:09**

Yes, there wasn't many houses over there.

**Ethel Curtis 13:12**

There was an undertaker over there. And I tell you who the undertaker was. It was Father Williams father... he was an undertaker. His father was an undertaker.

**Jacob Torkelson 13:25**

So Slabtown itself was the two main streets? Union or Main Street and then Marl Pit Road? Is that how you understood it?

**Ethel Curtis 13:38**

Marl Pit Road described the whole place.

**Jacob Torkelson 13:42**

Tell me more.

**Ethel Curtis 13:43**

Marl Pit Road....I'm 86 now, so my memory is not that great. My mother's house was on Marl Pit Road. It was two roads. This one going down like this. And then it was another one going this way. And one coming in—the entrance. The only one I can remember is the one that my mom lived on. And that was called Marl Pit Road. I don't know about this road going this way, or this one coming in... I think they were all called the same thing. I'm not sure...

**Jacob Torkelson 14:23**

It's interesting you say that. I've been reading that as the park acquired land, they obliterated certain roads. I wonder if that's part of it.

When did you.... you said you weren't born in Slabtown?

**Ethel Curtis 14:45**

I was born in a hospital in Hampton.

**Jacob Torkelson 14:46**

In Hampton, okay. But lived your whole life in Slabtown?

**Ethel Curtis 14:49**

Yes

**Jacob Torkelson 14:50**

Until your mother sold—

**Ethel Curtis 14:53**

I think we lived somewhere for a couple of years, but we first lived in a small house in a different part of Slabtown. And then we moved to... I have a picture of our house. Yes, this is our house. Yes, we moved to this one. But we lived in a small one, and then we all moved to this one.

**Jacob Torkelson 15:39**

How would you describe the house you grew up in?

**Ethel Curtis 16:00**

It was a huge, is a huge house! Nine rooms. And an unfinished basement. It was huge... it was huge. And we didn't live in all those rooms. I think this room over here was vacant.

**Jacob Torkelson 16:17**

Where was your room?

**Ethel Curtis 16:23**

Over, on this side. My room was on the other side. You've got pictures of it!

**Jacob Torkelson 16:39**

I read the file, yes.

**Ethel Curtis 16:41**

Yes, this is the side my room was on. This side. Yes, my mother's room was here, and my room was there. Then my brother's room was over on the other side. During the war, there was a room that my dad—rented in the front of the house—. He rented it out to people that were stationed at the warfare school. It was the Navy then, its Coast Guard now. That front room was always rented out to someone.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:13**

And that brought in some extra income then?

**Ethel Curtis 17:13**

Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:13**

What did your father do? And your mother?

**Ethel Curtis 17:21**

My mother... both of them retired from the weapons station. My dad went there first and then my mom. My dad worked in something called TNT explosives. He only lived to be seventy-one or two, something like that. Early 70s. And my mom retired as a packer.

**Jacob Torkelson 17:45**

As a packer? Tell me more about that.

**Ethel Curtis 17:48**

I don't know what she was packing. She just packed them, wrapped them, and sent them out. That's what she did.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:00**

That's great. I'm curious, why such a big house? Do you know?

**Ethel Curtis 18:08**

Well, it became... vacant and on sale and my dad bought it. It was just the four of us.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:17**

Your dad... the Braxton line... he had lived elsewhere in Slabtown prior?

**Ethel Curtis 18:25**

Further on the same road, Marl Pit Road, but it was a smaller house. I think it was about four rooms... two, three... yes, a four-room house.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:37**

And did your dad build that first house?

**Ethel Curtis 18:42**

I don't know. And then he sold that house and bought that big one.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:45**

You spoke about your mother and your father and your brother. Did you have other siblings? How many were you?

**Ethel Curtis 18:54**

Just one brother.

**Jacob Torkelson 18:54**

One brother and what was his name?

**Ethel Curtis 18:58**

Stafford and he was killed in an accident in 2005.

**Jacob Torkelson 19:28**

When you and your brother and all the other kids from the neighborhood were growing up... where did you play in the neighborhood? Tell me about it.

**Ethel Curtis 19:38**

All out here! [motions to the battlefield] This was the battleground. You just pretended you were soldiers. And then there were trenches. And we just ran up and down them... most of the time we played right out here.

**Jacob Torkelson 19:51**

Who won?

**Ethel Curtis 19:53**

I can't remember! I can't remember! During that time, we did a lot of walking. You know. And we walked all out here on the battlefield. And then there was a path leading to a beach. I think they called it Crow's Nest. It went down... It was like a hill. We went down that hill and that's where we bathed. I never swam.

**Jacob Torkelson 20:20**

In the river?

**Ethel Curtis 20:21**

Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 20:22**

Did you move around a lot? Did you go to Yorktown, or did—

**Ethel Curtis 20:28**

We walked to Yorktown a lot. We had no cars. We did a lot of walking. We had no weight problem because you did so much walking. We walked everywhere. We walked to church. We walk to school... everywhere.

**Jacob Torkelson 20:45**

Tell me a little bit about the street and the landscape. What was that like?

**Ethel Curtis 20:52**

The street first... was not clay, but dirt. And then finally they paved it. Well, both of them. The main street was paved and then that little side street there was paved too. I don't know what they called that street. I think we all called it Marl Pit Road. I believe. I don't know why they named it Marl Pit Road.

**Jacob Torkelson 21:20**

Well, that's interesting. I was just walking out there this morning.

**Ethel Curtis 21:23**

Did you really? We were out there, when was it we walked out there Cassie?

**Cassie Philips 21:41**

When we did this article. We walked all through— the area.

**Ethel Curtis 21:48**

There is a road that leads to where my parents' home was. That's the only one that's open. It's by my parents' home.

**Jacob Torkelson 21:55**

I tried to match the photo of you in front of your house. The one from the article... when I was out there.

**Ethel Curtis 22:02**

I think I've got on the same jacket!

**Jacob Torkelson 22:07**

Really?

**Ethel Curtis 22:57**

There was a hill! This way. And we used to play on that hill. Especially when there was a snow. Slide down there. We didn't have a sleigh. We just slid down!

**Jacob Torkelson 23:11**

What was it like living on a battlefield and in a National Park?

**Ethel Curtis 23:14**

You know during that time, I wasn't aware of the history. I wasn't aware of that. But we lived right on the battlefield.

**Jacob Torkelson 23:25**

What did you think the hills were? You knew it was a battlefield?

**Ethel Curtis 23:29**

I did, but I wasn't aware of all the history. You know, I wasn't aware of how much a part we played in that. It just wasn't something that I thought about until after I got older.

**Jacob Torkelson 23:47**

And what do you think about it now?

**Ethel Curtis 23:49**

I think it's great. I mean, I'm part of something.

**Cassie Philips 23:53**

Part of history.

**Ethel Curtis 23:53**

I'm part of something great. And I'm being interviewed. It's—

**Jacob Torkelson 23:59**

You're a celebrity.

**Ethel Curtis 23:59**

My kids think... when I say kids, my two nephews, and my son thinks it's wonderful. I talked to the one in Atlanta yesterday, and he said, "Great!" No, what was that word? "Super!" They think it's great that I'm a part of all of this.



**Jacob Torkelson 24:22**

Well, I think it's great too!

**Ethel Curtis 24:25**

Me too. Me too. I really—I wish I could go back further. But I can't.

**Jacob Torkelson 24:30**

I guess my question would be, even if you can't go back further, did your father or his family talk about their ancestors going all the way back—?

**Ethel Curtis 24:41**

No, no. I can remember we had a cousin named Luke. And it was so ironic how when we started this research, I saw his name. But I can't tell you anything about him. my mom would talk more about it than my dad. I can't tell you anything about Luke. I just know that he was an elderly man. He lived up the road from us. In fact, he lived up the road from my grandfather's house. When we moved to the big house, his place was right across the street from us. I didn't realize that until I saw a map. This was after I was grown, and we'd moved out. There wasn't a lot of history that was told to me.

But I know my dad worked at the CCC camp.

**Jacob Torkelson 25:47**

What did he do at the camp? Do you know?

**Ethel Curtis 25:50**

I don't know. But I know my mom said he would bring food home for us. And my husband who's talked about it a lot. Now, he was a historian. He didn't have the title, but he could go back further in history than I can. He said, as boys, they used to go down and bring back food. They were too young to work, but they would go and then the cooks would make sure that they had food to bring back to their families.

**Jacob Torkelson 26:23**

And his name was...?

**Ethel Curtis 26:23**

Thomas

**Jacob Torkelson 26:24**

Thomas Curtis?

**Ethel Curtis 26:26**

Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 26:26**

And his family lived right there... by Slabtown?

**Ethel Curtis 26:29**

No. They lived on Goosley Road. In walking distance. But when [the Park Service] took Slabtown, they took the houses on Goosley Road as well.

**Jacob Torkelson 26:58**

Did you visit there a lot?

**Ethel Curtis 27:01**

Yes. This is not the house he was born in. Okay. There was a big house on the side. That was the house; the family house. And he wasn't born here anyway. He was born in Philadelphia, but they came back to their grandmother's house, which is right next door to this one. But it was like a two-story, older house.

**Jacob Torkelson 27:19**

How did you two meet?

**Ethel Curtis 27:22**

Well, his sister and I were very close.

**Jacob Torkelson 27:26**

And what was her name?

**Ethel Curtis 27:27**

Marie. We were very close. And then we just started from that. My husband and I were married for almost 65 years.

**Jacob Torkelson 27:41**

Wow. Shouldn't we all be so lucky. He sounds like an amazing man.

**Ethel Curtis 30:47**

He was. He was. He was... he was more of a historian than I am.

**Jacob Torkelson 30:53**

Did he get you into the Slabtown history?

**Ethel Curtis 30:58**

No. But he knew so much about Yorktown and York County. And he helped build the bridge that went over—the York River.

**Jacob Torkelson 31:12**

The big metal one over the river?

**Cassie Philips 31:13**

The George P. Coleman Bridge.

**Ethel Curtis 31:14**

Yes, he did. Yes. He told a story of how, every Monday, he would show up and the foreman would come out and say, “Get your hat and go to work.” He did that about three times and they would always skip over him. So, the third time when they said, “You, you, and you,” he went right along with the rest of them. That's how he got in! He's really the one that could take you back because he liked history. He loved history. And I told him, I said, “you would have made a wonderful history teacher.” He could tell you so much.

**Jacob Torkelson 32:43**

Tell me a little bit about where you went to school?

**Ethel Curtis 32:47**

I went to school over here at the training school. I did the 11 years. And then I went away to stay with an aunt in Pennsylvania. I took a night course... a business course. Hated every minute of it. Couldn't wait to get back home. Just... Walked to school. Hardly ever missed a day. Walked in all kinds of weather. Same thing about church. We had no other way. There was no bus. If you wanted to go to school, you had to walk.

**Jacob Torkelson 33:24**

You said you went to night school—business school. What did you end up doing then? What was your—

**Ethel Curtis 33:29**

I took a business course. I worked for a while at the Coast Guard. It wasn't the Coast Guard then, it was Naval Weapons Station. So, I worked there for a while.

Then my main job was...I went to work in the cafeteria. It was the James Weldon Johnson School then. Stayed there 15 years. Got promoted to cafeteria manager, down

the street. So, I went down the road to York Elementary and I stayed there 20 years. And that's where I retired.

**Jacob Torkelson 34:10**

So, starting at the middle school and—

**Ethel Curtis 34:13**

And I really loved the elementary school because I love working with little children, especially beginners. I love that.

**Jacob Torkelson 34:31**

We've covered a lot of ground already. Tell me, what is your earliest memory of Slabtown?

**Ethel Curtis 34:47**

Just playing. Baseball. I love baseball. That was when I was living in the small house.

**Jacob Torkelson 34:57**

Where did you play baseball?

**Ethel Curtis 34:59**

There was a vacant lot across the street from us, from the small house. And my mother always told a story about how she would get my hair done. And then I'd go play baseball and just mess it up. I loved baseball. I really did. That's my earliest memory of just playing baseball with the Banks's. Mary Banks. They were a big family. They used to live. Across the street from our home. We had our own baseball team.

**Jacob Torkelson 36:21**

Wow. Well, let's see... I've come across the fact that there were a few different communities like Slabtown. Did you ever hear anything about some of these other communities around Slabtown? Like the group that was displaced from the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station? I mean, that was much earlier. But did you ever hear anything about that?

**Ethel Curtis 36:48**

Not much. Not anything about their history. My husband knew, because he talked about that every now and then because he had an aunt that lived up there. And he knew some of the families that lived on the station and then they had to come out and that's when they went to Lackey. I think that's when they formed Lackey. I'm not sure, but I just heard him speak of it.

**Jacob Torkelson 37:09**

What was the relationship like between Slabtown and Yorktown?

**Ethel Curtis 37:15**

And Yorktown?

**Jacob Torkelson 37:15**

Yes.

**Cassie Philips 37:20**

Slabtown was a community in and unto itself. Yorktown is where the doctor... Yorktown was basically Caucasian. So Slabtown, you know, whenever anyone from Slabtown went into Yorktown it was either to—

**Ethel Curtis 37:48**

Shop.

**Cassie Philips 37:49**

Shop, or, go to the doctor. So, it wasn't... that camaraderie that... that was going on in Slabtown.

**Ethel Curtis 38:00**

There were a few black families in Yorktown.

**Cassie Philips 38:09**

One lived over on Church St.

**Ethel Curtis 38:11**

There was a black shoe maker, Butler. Actually, when I was about 12, Mr. Butler hired me in the shoe shop. Hated that job!

**Jacob Torkelson 38:24**

To do what?

**Ethel Curtis 38:24**

I helped him with shoes! I got so that I could put a heal on a shoe. I couldn't put the soles on, but I did the heels. But I hated to get the polish and stuff on your hands. I hate that. But I stayed there for maybe a couple years. Yes, he paid \$8 a week.

**Cassie Philips 38:49**

In a lot of ways, they were fairly separate places?

**Ethel Curtis 38:53**

Oh, yes. Yes. We just went there... there was a drug store there. There was a hardware store down there. There was a store called Mr. Finds, where they sold everything... shoes... everything. And there was a grocery store. There was a gas station because my husband worked the gas station. Mostly we just went there to shop.

**Jacob Torkelson 39:21**

Did you ever feel any tension between the two?

**Ethel Curtis 39:25**

No, no, I didn't. It's like when I went to work in the school system and when we changed over...I didn't...there was not tension, you know... let's see cafeteria managers, I think it was like three of us and the rest were Caucasian. We were all like family. We the did same thing. You know, our main goal was to take care of the kids.

**Jacob Torkelson 40:03**

So when... we'll fast forward a little bit now to when Slabtown... when you left Slabtown. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about what you were feeling... what was going through your head at that time?

**Ethel Curtis 40:17**

Let's see, I left Slabtown before my mom did because I went to live with my husband. I got married at 19. So, I went right from my mother's house to my husband's home. I didn't feel any... like sadness. The only thing I felt...I think I felt sad when my mom started moving her things out. You know, because I didn't go that far from my mother's house. I mean it was right up here you know, so, it was... I think the sadness came when I knew that she was moving, and she had to get rid of some of her things because she was going into a smaller place. I think that's when the feelings hit me...

**Jacob Torkelson 41:06**

Do you remember how she was feeling?

**Ethel Curtis 41:09**

My mother did not want to leave that big house! When they came and told them that they had to move... if they did not agree and then they would.... what do you call that, when they take it over?

**Jacob Torkelson 41:28**

Eminent domain.

**Ethel Curtis 41:31**

Yes. The pressure went up. My dad was living then, and it didn't really bother him, but of course he passed before the move. But then once she moved into a smaller place she was happy up there. She really was.

**Jacob Torkelson 41:50**

You said that she moved with lot of her friends? Tell me about that.

**Ethel Curtis 41:53**

They all moved, you know. Let's see, beside her there were the Marshalls. They were like two doors away from her... across the field from her were the Billups's. She was right next door to her. Across the street where the Banks's. So, they were all right there together, you know, and... she was fine with it, once she got settled. Once she settled in she was fine with it because she was only about five minutes away from me. So...

**Jacob Torkelson 42:38**

Did most people feel that way? Would you say?

**Ethel Curtis 42:41**

No. No, they didn't. But those that were up there with her. They were... they enjoyed it. They really did. My mother-in-law moved from this street. She was about, maybe, two doors away from my mom. So, it was just like family again. You know... family close together looking out for each other.

**Cassie Philips 43:16**

The difference, from what from what I've heard, when the families had to relocate to go over here on this side. There were a lot of the residents that were really sad, because they had to leave their way of life. They had to learn a whole new way of doing things, getting things... because within Slabtown, there were stores, right?

**Ethel Curtis 43:56**

No. No stores.

**Cassie Philips 43:56**

So that information is not correct.



Okay. But they were sad because if they had to develop a whole new way of life. You know, they were so close-knit they were so used-to being able to just get up and do. When over here, they had to learn how to do things a little different. And their farms were gone... those that had orchards—

**Ethel Curtis 45:03**

I don't think they had farms. They had like little gardens.

**Cassie Philips 45:08**

One resident said her dad had chickens and cows and—

**Ethel Curtis 45:14**

No, they didn't have cows, they had chickens. The big farms, the larger farms... my grandfather had a huge farm. And when he passed on... I don't think there were any large farms out there because he had a farm... by the road that we took going into Uniontown. There was a whole space over there where he had vegetables and then he had so much... his farm was large-enough that he could take vegetables, fruit... he had fruit trees, like apple and pear. He could take them and sell them somewhere else, but I don't think anybody else had that much room... that did that much farming and there were little gardens behind the houses. My dad had a garden behind his house. We had one pig. We had a few chickens, but it was not a huge amount of stuff.

**Jacob Torkelson 46:15**

It's interesting because I was walking around Slabtown and there were oyster shells everywhere. Do you have any inclination why?

**Ethel Curtis 46:27**

Oyster shells?

**Jacob Torkelson 46:29**

I thought they were oysters, but I don't know...

**Ethel Curtis 46:32**

I don't know... I know up where my dad, where we used to live there was a big—walnut tree.

**Cassie Philips 46:39**

Oyster company?

**Ethel Curtis 46:40**

Not oyster company, no. Walnut tree, because we saw some walnuts. There were walnuts out there... even now there's walnuts...but oyster shells?

**Cassie Philips 46:53**

Something about Waterman off of the York River—

**Ethel Curtis 47:01**

My dad used to love the water. He did some fishing... he did some oysters. He used to do oysters and fish. But when he retired from the Weapons Station, he couldn't do it anymore because he had arthritis so bad. But he loved the water.

**Jacob Torkelson 47:21**

Tell me about Shiloh. Tell me about going to church there.

**Ethel Curtis 47:25**

Oh. We just walked. We had to make a fire when we got there in the winter time—

**Jacob Torkelson 47:30**

In the church?

**Ethel Curtis 47:31**

In the church, in the Sunday school room. And we loved going, we loved going. Then we had something in the evening call BYPU. we used to like that.

**Jacob Torkelson 47:57**

Tell me about that.

**Ethel Curtis 47:59**

Well it was like a training, you know training for young people. BYPU. I forgot what that's called, what is it? Baptist?

**Cassie Philips 48:09** ...? I don't remember. [Baptist Young Peoples Union]

**Ethel Curtis 48:18**

But that's what we did you know... that was what you did. That what was your entertainment.

**Jacob Torkelson 48:26**

Did you spend a lot of your free time at the church?

**Ethel Curtis 48:31**

Just on Sundays. We had a choir, so I did that. We have a youth choir. I think that I was... did I have a youth choir? No...my son was in the youth choir. You know... church, that's what you did. You know that's what was expected of you.

**Jacob Torkelson 49:09**

Now, describe the church to me I haven't seen any photos inside.

**Ethel Curtis 49:14**

Oh, let's see... we had one huge room, that was a Sunday school room. Then the sanctuary was one big room and then you had this room over here was a choir room. They used to have an outdoor bathroom, but they did finally put in an indoor bathroom in. That was on this side.

**Jacob Torkelson 49:34**

When was that? Do you remember how old you were?

**Ethel Curtis 49:39**

I was well into my teens We had wooden benches. This church has the windows now, that were in the old church.

**Jacob Torkelson 50:00**

There was a steeple with a bell, right?

**Ethel Curtis 50:04**

You know, but I don't think we ever rang the bell.

**Jacob Torkelson 50:10**

Today I was reading the file and I came across a... let me pull up a... the photo. It see it would seem that Shiloh owned another church, just down the way. Did you know about that one?

**Ethel Curtis 50:24**

Beulah.

**Jacob Torkelson 50:25**

Tell me about that.

**Ethel Curtis 50:26**

That was on Surrender Road.

**Jacob Torkelson 50:29**

Not in Slabtown.

**Ethel Curtis 50:30**

Yes. But I never went to Beulah. I never, I never attended Beulah. But I know that it belonged to our church. Beulah belong to us, and then the McNorton's had a big house up on the hill that was ours. And when we sold out to the Park Service... I don't know about Beulah, but I know the McNorton's house was included. I don't think they got nearly enough, but anyway... that was the way they took care of business right at that time.

**Jacob Torkelson 51:03**

And what did the church think about moving?

**Ethel Curtis 51:09**

Well, we liked moving into a nice new building. And when we moved, I can remember we marched from the old church to the new church. That was, that was exciting.

**Cassie Philips 51:23**

With the church that was on Surrender Road, or...?

**Ethel Curtis 51:27**

Well the church, they sold that too. I don't know if that was in the package with the McNaughton house. Because I don't know a lot about how they did business then. But I know the McNaughton house and the church was combined, and the... but we marched from the old church up here.

**Jacob Torkelson 51:48**

Tell me a little bit about the other march, the homecoming march.

**Cassie Philips 51:56**

That's the march... we marched from here to the old.

**Ethel Curtis 52:00**

I am going to take a break. And you can tell him about that.

**Jacob Torkelson 52:03**

We will give you a break. We've been interrogating you.

**Ethel Curtis 52:06**

I'm enjoying it.

**Ethel Curtis 56:26**

Well, I hope I have been some help...

**Jacob Torkelson 56:27**

Well, yes, and I still have a few questions, if you're up for it.

**Ethel Curtis 56:30**

That's fine.

**Jacob Torkelson 56:53**

I wanted to revisit briefly... when your mother left, what was her offer? What do you remember? What did they offer her to leave?

**Ethel Curtis 57:11**

Yes. I don't mind sharing this with you. \$22,000

**Jacob Torkelson 57:37**

For that huge house?

**Ethel Curtis 57:50**

They revisited it and gave her a little bit more. It seems to me she got a little bit more... let's look at this one. \$28,000. Yes, here is the last one.

**Cassie Philips 58:28**

Yes, she refused to take their first offer.

**Ethel Curtis 58:33**

But you know, when it was all over, she enjoyed being up there. It was just a matter of moving out of a big house. Leaving some of... she have to get rid of some of her things. She couldn't take all that stuff with her. You know, I said Mom, you can't put all that stuff in your new place... but she would still go over there and get stuff and bring it in.

**Jacob Torkelson 59:04**

So, she went back to the old house even after she left? She kept going back until they knocked it down?

**Ethel Curtis 59:09**

And they took forever to knock it down. They took forever. My son loved that house. He loved it... he said, I wonder if you could move it somewhere. And I thought if you move that house it would fall all to pieces.

**Jacob Torkelson 59:23**

Did they do that a lot? Did they acquire that property, then keep the house and wait—

**Ethel Curtis 59:29**

They did hers. Her house... because she was one of the last ones to get out of there. Yes.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:00:32**

Growing up in Slabtown, was there always pressure that the Park Service would be gobbling up land?

**Ethel Curtis 1:00:46**

No, no. We never thought of it until it actually came down.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:00:56**

That's interesting. I was reading the Shiloh file today, and I enjoyed... there was a letter from George Billups and it said that they were... the residents themselves have banded together with the church. And they had said that... if [the NPS] is trying to acquire the church's property, they would have to resettle everyone together. It would seem that this was the case.

**Ethel Curtis 1:01:25**

You know, I don't know anything about this letter. No. And if there were... if it was discussed then my mom and dad didn't tell us. You know. The only thing I know is when it finally came down, that they had... the government was saying they were going to... they had to move. But as far as that, I don't know anything about that.

**Cassie Philips 1:01:48**

It's in the history book.

**Ethel Curtis 1:01:50**

George Billups's letter? Is it his father or is it George?

**Cassie Philips 1:01:56**

I'm not sure. George... what, well what was his father's name?

**Ethel Curtis 1:02:00**

George.

**Cassie Philips 1:02:01**

Hahaha. Okay, great...

**Jacob Torkelson 1:02:08**

Tell me a little bit about some of the other buildings in Slabtown that weren't houses.

**Ethel Curtis 1:02:14**

The only thing out there were like barns...The Masonic Temple... that was on the main highway going in. And it was like a two-story building... was it like two-stories? Yes, that's right.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:02:29**

Do you remember anything about that? Or the relationship of the Masons to the town?

**Ethel Curtis 1:02:43**

No, they were just like a little group that... to themselves. The Masons and the Eastern Stars. My mother was neither one.

**Cassie Philips 1:02:57**

Did they move this building from...? From that location, to over here [on Goosley Road]?

**Ethel Curtis 1:02:59**

I have no idea!

**Cassie Philips 1:03:03**

This one's made out of wood. And I think that one's made out of brick—

**Ethel Curtis 1:03:07**

Unless they just sold them—

**Cassie Philips 1:03:08**

It's designed the same way!

**Ethel Curtis 1:03:14**

My mom was not an Eastern Star. And my dad was something called and Oddfellow. I don't know where they had their meetings. My mom was part of a group called the Tents. That was like a secret order.



**Cassie Philips 1:03:31**

Social—

**Ethel Curtis 1:03:31**

Yes. There were Eastern stars and Masonics.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:03:40**

They're the ones that have the other cemetery by the National Cemetery?

**Ethel Curtis 1:03:42**

Yes, they still have a cemetery out there.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:03:44**

Okay. Yes, that's great. Let's see ...I made some arrows here. Well, that's most of my questions. I wonder, do you still keep in touch with other Slabtown residents?

**Ethel Curtis 1:04:12**

I'm trying to think who is here now.

**Cassie Philips 1:04:54**

But there are some families in the church ... that lived in Slabtown.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:06:09**

Is there anything you wish I had asked or anything else you want to elaborate on?

**Ethel Curtis 1:06:25**

Can you think of anything?

**Jacob Torkelson 1:06:29**

I still love to hear about the homecoming

**Ethel Curtis 1:06:31**

And the waysides?

**Cassie Philips 1:06:32**

Yes, that was homecoming. I have been trying to get Shiloh listed in the Historic Register. But it is one big challenge.

**Ethel Curtis 1:07:35**

I think...years back, we had someone named... a gentleman named Charles C. Brown, who was a historian in his own right. He wasn't called a historian, but he was. I think the Lord sent us Cassie.

**Cassie Philips 1:07:56**

Yes, Charles—

**Ethel Curtis 1:07:57**

I mean, I'm a lifelong resident of this place and she knows a lot more! You know, I think I've called you Charles a couple times...

**Cassie Philips 1:08:10**

Yes, you have.

**Ethel Curtis 1:08:10**

Yes. But he was, he was so good about keeping us informed and telling us what was going to happen in the county. And because when we started with the voting, he made sure and put it someplace where one of those machines was so that we could practice. That's the way he was, he was such a help to us. So... so now we have Cassie.

**Cassie Philips 1:08:35**

We have a ministry here that... the African American Affairs Ministry. My husband and I, and another member head up... so we're involved with all that... all those things I should say. So, you know, it is a blessing that we're able to open things up and share and get people involved. Black History Month here is very busy.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:09:13**

I'd love for you to tell me a little bit about the homecoming celebration.

**Cassie Philips 1:09:21**

The homecoming was, oh, man, it was it was such an honor to be able to participate in that. Organizing it, I worked very closely with Diane Depew and the Park Service to get it done. And we had a symposium here that highlighted Slabtown. The symposium was on Slabtown and we had a wonderful three-hour session with professors and lecturers and presenters. After the symposium... the symposium was on a Saturday and that Sunday marked our hundred-and-fiftieth church anniversary. So, for months, we planned to celebrate that with a march from this church back to the old church. And it was... I mean, it was exhilarating. It was just so... and the celebration was on Facebook, there's a picture of a group of people that is the picture from the march from here back to the old location of the church.

**Ethel Curtis 1:11:29**

That day was so hot! I rode down to the... it was extremely hot.

**Cassie Philips 1:11:37**

She did. It was. It was.

**Ethel Curtis 1:11:45**

It was so exciting! Yes, exciting.

**Cassie Philips 1:11:49**

Everyone was so excited to be able to do that. I mean... we had little ones to big ones there. And the thing is, after the waysides were dedicated, we went across the way to the cemetery and we laid wreaths. Well, we had the children put wreaths on graves, but what was so emotional was there were people there from the church that did not know they have relatives buried over there. It was such an exciting time for everyone to be able to go back to where it all started and to see where they came from and where they are now. It was really a fabulous celebration.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:12:59**

Do you think the church knows a lot more about its history now?

**Cassie Philips 1:13:02**

Oh! Absolutely!

**Ethel Curtis 1:13:04**

So much more.

**Cassie Philips 1:13:07**

Everyone says that. At times members will say, "you put us on the map!"

**Ethel Curtis 1:13:17**

Yes.

**Cassie Philips 1:13:18**

You know and then some of the congregates will say the same thing, "we don't know what we would do without you," ... with regard to keeping them informed about certain things.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:01**

Here's a picture of the main street. This was the entrance into Slabtown here, from what I understand

**Ethel Curtis 1:17:12**

Mhm.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:13**

And then there's the stop sign and that's the other cross road from the other direction.

**Ethel Curtis 1:17:21**

Yes, that was a long time ago.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:23**

This is one photo... I had no idea... I don't know if you know anything about that.

**Ethel Curtis 1:17:27**

No

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:28**

It was supposedly a dance hall, but I had no idea...

**Ethel Curtis 1:17:32**

That was before my time

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:36**

Do you remember these stores [across from the National Cemetery]?

**Ethel Curtis 1:17:39**

It's a store. That's a... that looks like Hopson's store. And the church... the old church is right here. The old church is there.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:53**

What did they sell at the store?

**Ethel Curtis 1:17:55**

Everything. Shoes, clothes, groceries.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:17:58**

Is that where you shopped?

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:00**

No, we went into Yorktown. But he just turned it into a store where you can just buy whatever.

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:07**

And this was like a restaurant. Yes, that was a restaurant there.

**Cassie Philips 1:18:13**

So, there was a restaurant in Slabtown?

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:15**

No. No this was by Hopson's store.

**Cassie Philips 1:18:19**

Surrender road?

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:29**

No this was over by where the old church was. Is that Old Hampton Road? I think that's what they call it.

**Cassie Philips 1:18:30**

Yes, that's what they call it.

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:30**

You see the old church is right here. Hopson's store is there, and the church was right there.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:18:30**

Here, this photo is a little better. This is the... here's the church.

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:34**

Yes, there is the church. This looks like—

**Jacob Torkelson 1:18:38**

I think this is the same picture here. Must be a gas station or something... some houses...

**Ethel Curtis 1:18:46**

Now that house... I don't remember any of those houses. Because that looks to me... that the church should be right there. This doesn't look like the store. Let me have a look

closer. No. This is something else, because... I don't remember this. Yes, there is the two houses.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:19:20**

Do you remember a trailer park across from the church or near the church? The name was Zook.

**Ethel Curtis 1:19:36**

Zook's. Yes, but it's been such a long time, because they relocated him. Zook's trailer court.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:19:48**

Yes, he... do you remember anything about him? He seemed like an interesting man... I was reading today that he found out that the park wanted that property. And he wanted to get the most money out of it, so he threatened to demolish the earthwork that was there. He got a building permit, subdivided the lot, and he got it all ready for sale. Then he said, "[NPS] you have one week to give me a good offer, or I'm going to demolish the part you need."

**Cassie Phillips 1:20:27**

Really!

**Ethel Curtis 1:20:27**

This I don't remember... here I don't remember this. Unless! But... you know what this is!? Now it comes back to me...this was another store that the Marshall's owned. And this house here was where Miss Rosalie lived. And then this house here was where Vadie lived.

**Cassie Philips 1:21:01**

But they were up on the hill, though, right?

**Ethel Curtis 1:21:02**

Yes. It was like a little hill because this was like... a little house here. This was the Marshall Store. And this house, I don't know who owned it, but Rosalie lived on the downstairs. And then this was... see Vadie was married to my aunt. And this little... the little house here was in the yard where the big house was. The house right there, that's what this is. That's what this is.

**Cassie Philips 1:21:34**

We have Marshall's in the church too.

**Ethel Curtis 1:21:36**

If you sit here long enough, and it will come back to you!

The Marshall's lived next door to my mother. But this is his store and that's the church... huh, yes! And that's... Rosalie lived there, and this is where Vadie lived... and this little house he just had it rented out. hmmm! If I sit here long enough, I will remember them all.

**Jacob Torkelson 1:22:41**

That's really all I have... but I can always come up with something else!

It'll take me a while to transcribe our interview... but in the meantime, if I have questions I will reach out to you both. Thank you.



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